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Signet Literary Magazine is an annual journal of art and literature published at Queens University of Charlotte. All of the works within its pages were written, compiled, edited, drawn, photographed, sketched, spit, or sculpted by Queens University of Charlotte students, faculty, or staff.

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Senior Editor: Justin Lafreniere
Junior Editor: Faith Lippard
Fiction Editor: Natalie Stewart
Nonfiction Editor: Megan Okkerse
Poetry Co-Editor: Joel Ferdon
Poetry Co-Editor: Lauren McKinney
Assistant Art Editor: Bree Stallings

Faculty Advisor: Professor S. Craig Renfroe Jr.

Special Thanks: SGA, the English Department, Main Street Rag Publishing Company, Professor Charles Israel Jr., Submishmash Submission Management, the Art Department, Dean Morton, and readers like you.

Signet Literary Magazine would especially like to thank everyone who submitted this year. We sincerely enjoyed reading everything, and we hope you will submit again next year.

Cover Art: "Cowichan" by Jessie Hunt
Logo Design: Justin Lafreniere & Bree Stallings

Statements from the Editors

Dear Readers, Viewers of Art, and Page Surfers,

I know I should probably say something insightful. Maybe I should quote a famous author. Or I could dish out some of the nitty-gritty, toiling elbow grease that went into the magazine. Actually, that last one sounds a bit gross. So, I'm simply going to give you one thing of advice, and that is to enjoy the magazine.

P.S. If you're a rising junior (yes, you out there) and you're interested in writing or editing or art and free cookies, there is a junior editor position waiting for you! Even if you're not a rising junior, you should join Signet!

I'm done now,
Faith Lippard
Junior Editor, Class of 2012

Dear Reader,

I hope you find within these pages more than just some writing by your friends, peers, or collegues, more than poems and photos, drawings and stories. I hope what you find within these pages is something that lives, breathes, that keeps you up at night and tucks you gently between the covers. I hope these works are disconcerting and uncomfortable, amazing and delicate.

This magazine has come a long way in my four years with it. The staff derserves all the credit for the accomplishment you're holding. I could not have asked for a better team and hope they are as proud of this product as I am. Most of all, I must thank the magazine's two guiding forces: you, the readers and authors and artists, and Professor Craig Renfroe. Without him, none of this and few of the strides I have made as a reader, a writer, and an editor would have been possible.

So it comes to this, as all stories do: an end. A goodbye. A moment where, turning back from the unknown, we have the chance to survey all that has been done and decide whether to continue into uncertainity, into the breech of a beginning, or to turn back. I hope, reader, that you will walk through the unknowns in the stories, poems, photographs, essays, and artwork. If you let them lead you, these works will move you in ways unexpected, horrible, beautiful.

Yours Always,
Justin Lafreniere
Senior Editor, Class of 2011

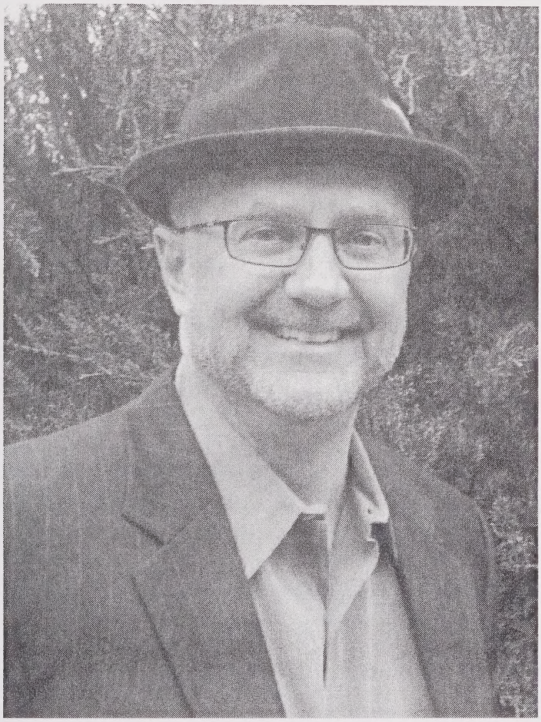
Table of Contents

Interview with Charles Israel Jr.	5
Dear Dead Man: Joel Ferdon	9
Color Me: Brynn Feeney	10
Train Sleep: Courtney Varnum	11
Climbing Trees: Sarah Schwister	12
Carnivore: Or How I Started Eating Meat: Megan Okkerse	13
Living Alive: Jen Windland	17
Awake My Soul: Jessie Hunt	18
Desecrate: Elizabeth Heffner	19
An Explosion in the Bay: Bree Stallings	20
Haunted: Natalie Stewart	21
Flying Away: Brynn Feeney	23
Amplified Silence: Nicole Pietrantonio	26
Que Una Donna Respira: Jordan Roberts	27
A Biography of the Reedy Creek Dam: Natalie Stewart	28
Commas: Kathleen Wile	29
Remember the Fallen: Khoury Beshara	30
The Breathing Place: Brynn Feeney	31
Quickening: Courntey Varnum	32
Ode to Da Vinci: Josi Bloch	33
Duck and Cover, The Spirit is Descending: Courtney Varnum	34
Romp of the Mind: Nicole Pietrantonio	35
Mysterious Noises from the Next Room: Travis Mullis	36
The Few Things I Know About My Birthparents: Courntey Varnum	46
Taboo: Darcy Russel	47
An Old Man's Keep: Rae Steinberg	48
A Family History: Dharna Macedo	49
Lost and Found: Natalie Stewart	53
Play Pretend: Darcy Russel	57
Poem Two: Megan Okkerse	58

I Know CPR: Faith Lippard 59
Hudson River Scene, Unsigned: Laura Forester 62
Victims of the Oil Spill: Bree Stallings 63
Dirty: Holly Lopez 64
My Education: Rae Steinberg 73
Paul and Me: Dara Cameron 74
Neat Little Package: Lauren McKinney 75
Clouds to the South: Molly Warren 76
The Mixx: Elizabeth Fritz 77
Mid-Flight: Jeremy McCamic 78
Windsor Knot: Nicole Pietrantonio 82
Empty Room, Empty Bottle: Brynn Feeney 83
Things to Hold On To: Mary Davis 84
Belly Dancer at Night: Bree Stallings 85
Three Haiku: Jessie Hunt 86
Jim+the Devil=3: Faith Lippard 87
The Farm Lane: Molly Warren 92
Four: Jen Windland 93
Settling: Mary Davis 94
Memento of a Warrior: Katrina Schweitzer 95
Absolutes: Hellen Hull 96
Sandcastle: Mary Davis 97
Leather-Heart: Justin Lafreniere 98
Blackout: Dara Cameron 111
Death Rattle: Mary Davis 112
My Couch: Faith Lippard 113
Submission Birds: Jessie Hunt 117
Haiku: Bree Stallings 118
A Confession Inspired By Winnie the Pooh: Ali Feudo 119
Dear '98 Ford Escort: Hayley Crumley 120
How Candles Die: Christian Williams 121
The Whales Moved On: Malcolm Campbell 127

Interview with Charles Israel Jr.

Natalie Stewart



Biography

Charles Israel Jr. is a Creative Writing professor at Queens University of Charlotte. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Virginia, a Masters of Arts in English Literature from UNC Chapel Hill, and a Masters of Fine Arts in Fiction from The University of Western Michigan. He has had both poems and short stories published in magazines such as The South Carolina Review, Slipstream, The MacGuffin, Sonora Review, North Carolina Literary Review, and Wisconsin Review, among others. He has many accomplishments in the literary world, but most recently published a book of poetry called "Stacking Weather."

Two Lu-Shihs for Lunch[1]

Charles Israel Jr.

I.

Dreaming is the stacking of weather.
Lightning cracks the yolk under the eggshell sky.
The sun wrinkles the air around the house
and crimps the edge of our faces.

When the wind comes in, fingers of rain
follow across summer. On the projectionist's
make-up table: a layer-cake of movie cans;
Buster Keaton's fingers, splicing reel to reel.

II.

Tonight at the Cineplex, The Itinerant.
We watch a pilgrim to Jokhang Temple
squat beside the lake of Yaundrok-Tso.
She washes her hands and touches her forehead.

The green wind leaves a brocade on the turquoise water.
Cumulus clouds try to roll over the Himalayas.
They can't unhinge themselves from the snow-ridges.
She eats fruit from the palm of Buddha.

1: Originally appeared in *Field* #73 Oberlin College Press (Fall 2005) and is also featured in Stacking Weather. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Interview

Natalie Stewart

Does being a creative writing professor help you in your own writing?
It does. In workshops, when going over a piece, you can see the students understanding what the work is trying to do. I will go home with the advice from workshop and transfer it to my own work. Our students are strong writers, and I love seeing them get excited about their own work. I also have wonderful colleagues here who are writers: (Professors) Morri (Creech), Craig (Renfroe), Julie (Funderburk), Sarah (Creech), and Shawn (Bowers).

When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?
First, when I was a kid, I liked reading so much and was able to recite passages. I dabbled in college; my last semester of undergrad at University of Virginia, I took a creative writing class and really liked it. It wasn't until years later that I had a moment in which I realized that if I didn't go get an MFA or start writing, it was never going to happen, and I had a frightening vision of what my life would be like if I didn't do it.

Who are some of your favorite poets?
Charles Simic, James Tate, John Ashbury, Elizabeth Bishop, Eavan Boland. There are others, but those are the more contemporary ones.

What do you think makes the most captivating subject matter?
One reason people start to write is to write about what captivates you, and what I'm interested in hasn't changed that much: mortality, death, class fissures in America, race, how people fall in and out of love.

What do you think plays a bigger role in writing: education or experience?
Both help. Imagination is the third stream for any writer. Education is worthwhile because it makes you humble. You can't get full of yourself thinking you've invented a situation or character after you've read Shakespeare and Dickens and Faulkner. Experience is important because it's searing. It happened to you and hit you in the heart and gut.

As a faculty member, what benefits have you seen Signet have for students?
Writing is public and private. You do the writing in private, and then it becomes public when you have a workshop in class. Signet is beneficial because it gives students an outlet other than class. It's a good step to publishing in the real world because it's the same just with a smaller audience.

How do you know when a poem is finished?
Learning when to let the poem go was my biggest challenge as a writer. I had been putting those poems on a treadmill, seeing punctuation coming in and out. I had to learn when the poem was done, and I could say, "No more." It's like writing a song: at some point, "Yesterday" by The Beatles has to be done. It could, quite frankly, be being tired of it. If I'm making the same corrections and changes I did a week ago, it's time to be done.

How does it feel to finally see "Stacking Weather" in print?
It felt like more a relief than I thought, because I had been working on it for a while. The individual poems had been published before but what changed was it's a book; and it's helped with getting invitations to readings, festivals, etc. There's no allusion of fame or fortune but it's a little mark. In some weird way the world has conferred this upon you and people have noticed.

Do you think your work in other genres has impacted this collection?
I do. I think a lot of these poems are reflexively narrative. In my first poetry class at Western Michigan, I had a professor tell me that about my poetry. The reason I got into the class (even though my genre was fiction) was because I didn't want to just write stories; I wanted to concentrate on the words themselves in a very kind of minute and powerful focus. So poetry has helped my fiction, because the sentences are stronger. I try not to throw anything away, because sometimes you have a busted poem with three good images that will turn up in a story.

What were some of your biggest inspirations for the poems in the collection?
Having a daughter. The first day I brought her home, she looked into my eyes, and I realized how deeply she would know me in ways that no one else would know me. My emotional range expanded just from that. I thought, "Okay, this is serious, this will make you a better person, because it will make you a deeper person."

The subject matter in each of the poems is so diverse. What did you want to be the unifying factor for the collection?
They each had a lot to do with what I was thinking about at the time thematically: death, class, race, and trying to figure out what we're doing in life perhaps. These things can all be rendered in language; that's the power of it.

There seems to be an Asian influence combined with an American south influence. Can you elaborate on that?
I found a collection of 100 Chinese poems translated by Kenneth Rexroth. Some of the poems are 1,400 years old but seemed very contemporary. I liked the use of nature, which seemed to me to be different from the way American poets use of it. I'm attracted to a lot of the Buddhist notions, which are kind of a philosophy, a religion, a way of looking at the world and seemed very helpful to my life at the time. The southern stuff may just be reflexive. I spent a lot of my time as a kid disdaining southern storytellers, not realizing that maybe I had absorbed it, not consciously, but maybe it's just there, it's just imitative. Southern narrative can be very discursive and a very strange wander all over the place.

What advice would you give young writers?
Read and write; it's very elemental. Faulkner used to read Dickens every year; he doesn't write like Dickens, but it's imitative. Having reinforcements is important and very much like sports that way: you practice with someone who has done it before. Writing is a solitary art for an audience. You have to do it by yourself, but there always has to be an audience.

Dear Dead Man

Joel Ferdon

Dear dead man, did you put the gun
In your hand, or wiggle your big toe through
The trigger of the butt? Did you shove the barrel widely
Down your throat? I think you pushed your tongue
Between the barrel and pulled
The trigger.

Color Me

Brynn Feeney

Pale, pallid, fair. Three words to describe
the coloring we share – a hue I've never liked.
I'd rather be rosy, bronze, or gold. If you could speak,
would you voice the same desire to be dyed
a deeper color? Imagine cherry red, sapphire, and
gentle plum. How much more inviting you'd be
for the shivering swimmer, fresh from the stream.
Cloth, of emerald green. Bold and ripe, as apples
before they age with summer. Soft, to wipe drops
left wandering the curvatures of skin.
And cotton's scent. Pure. Sweet, like lavender
in spring, wraps the wearer tight. Warm for
a moment and safe from wind that bites
tender flesh. A barricade. Hunching my shoulders,
I hide in its folds. Eyes closed, I see the sun
and envision your colors exposed.

Train Sleep

Courtney Varnum

Tonight I realized
with the trees slowly undressing,
baring their nude trunks and skinny arms for us once again,
that I can see the train I hear every night
from our front porch.

It was the lamplight that gave it away.
A sodium lamp.
A streetlight that lights no street, only the rails
just before the roadway.
It flickered in time with the click-clack
of wheels on ties,
a giant steel metronome.

The same rhythm I have known since childhood—
those invisible trains that work in the night.
Their whistle low and earthy. A prolonged mourning wail
diffused through my bedroom windows,
sustains me to sleep.

But tonight I am awake, while my own child sleeps
behind me, in the bedroom.
I wonder if she will hear
her memories whispering
in the faded echo of the train whistle.

Climbing Trees

Sarah Schwister

Climbing the tree is quite a task for
A young adult, breathing in the leaves;
Suppressing herself to its gentle arms.
Carefully ignoring her parental poltergeist-
Just wait a moment.
Prepare for lift off

Clambering the tree is a simple task
For an experienced renegade.
Watching the sky through the shimmering veil
Of emerald, a spill from the pirate's treasure chest.
Maybe they will share this time. Hold on.
Dirty hands cut open clean wounds over supper.
3...2...1...

Scrambling the tree is a grueling task
The bark smeared glistening red by her young hands
From its rough parental nurture
The sky is an open book, just jump in
Calculating...This may take a few minutes.
Glass hurts the worst, dinner is better than bedtimes then
Keep your seats in their upright and locked positions

Maybe, this time, she will make it
Listening to the dull beating, drum, drum

The clouds sailing away
She might board those vessels
This time, someone might miss the deadline
And soar far, far off.

You are now free to move about the cabin.

Carnivore: Or, How I Started Eating Meat

Megan Okkerse

I am in a relationship. We meet on the last Tuesday of every month at my favorite restaurant in the arts district of Charlotte. I come famished, hungry only for him. I am always the first one there. I sit with a glass of Pinot, salivating. Exactly 12 minutes go by before I see him, appropriately accompanied. He rarely shows up alone, but I don't care. I know he is mine and I plan to devour him, to take him in as a sensual feast. I grab him with both hands and bring him to my face. Eyes closed, I let the juice drip from the right corner of my lips, as the texture gets lost in the abyss of my mouth.

I am a carnivore.

I will never forget the day we met. My friend, Sally had recently started her own catering company, featuring Mediterranean fare. Preparations for a $10,000 surprise party for my boss were taking place in the living room of her apartment. I arrived to help, when out of the corner of my eye I saw him. A celebrity. Prosciutto. Thinly sliced. Its delicate being wrapped around the basil, goat cheese dollop, and pear. Oh to be that pear! Suddenly, Sally shoved me into the middle of the room face to face with the prosciutto as if we were at an eighth-grade party in someone's half-finished basement. We didn't speak. With trepidation, I bent down over the platter to introduce myself and before I knew it, he reached my lips. My eyes lit up, my taste buds lusting for more.

At the time of this meeting, I was in a monogamous relationship with an eating disorder. We met in high school and had been together ever since. Despite our loyalty to each other, my lover was controlling, dramatic, high maintenance, and ultimately self-destructive. I was not allowed to eat breakfast except for maybe an apple with my coffee, carbs were limited, and hunger imminent. I was required to keep up with a steady diet of health food magazines, the latest juice cleanse, and I was never allowed to eat more than anyone else when in the company of other people.

Although this relationship had lasted years, we had our ups and downs. Like any chaotic relationship, it fed off of really high highs and extremely low lows. A few years ago, I was living in Portland, OR when the economy or more honestly the recession of my emotional health forced me to move back to Charlotte for support. Support came by way of a local yoga studio. The studio was in a basement with orange walls and the room we practiced in was 97 degrees. The owner was a fifty-year-old woman who happened to come from one of the wealthiest families in the city. She recruited her husband to run the business with her and together they

drew a community of modern hippies. I started working at the studio and spent the next two years in downward facing dog or sitting on a cushion watching how my thoughts had contributed to the deteriation of my mental health. During the fall of 2009, I participated in their "40 days to a Personal Revolution" where you commit to practicing yoga six times a week, meditating twice a day, and coming to weekly meetings where you would tell a room full of 100 people how empty your life was before you found yoga, but how slapping an OM symbol on the back of your car and burning patchouli had saved your life. Since self-help was one of my favorite past times, I signed up. On week three of the program, we were asked to participate in a three day fruit cleanse. I went to the store and stocked up on grapes, apples, oranges, bananas, kiwi, avocados, and black olives, which according to Google, are considered a fruit.

When my roommate came home during the cleanse to find me eating guacamole and a can of black olives for dinner, he looked at me quizzically. I shot him back a daring glare. He clearly didn't understand that enlightenment was only three days and a bag of apples away. I remember feeling light. Light headed perhaps, but I floated through my yoga practice, believing that foregoing carbohydrates and protein was bumping me up in the proverbial line to meet God.

That day in Sally's apartment, I knew I had to end my destructive relationship in order to make space for this new one. I also knew it wouldn't be easy. The months following the initial meeting were one big identity crises. During the day, I would practice yoga, eat fruit, drink water, deny myself. But night is seductive and alluring. After work, I would sit out on my back porch, tiki torches lit, fireflies flitting among the bamboo trees lining my hammock. With a glass of wine, Van Morrison on the outdoor speakers, and a feast of fresh figs, assorted cheese, and prosciutto, my body started to relax in its company. My thoughts were less erratic at the dinner table than they were on my meditation cushion. Eventually, my vegan lifestyle frayed like over-processed hair and the flexibility of being a carnivore took root.

I had only retained a trace of my past relationship, when I met Rain. Against my better judgment and despite my transformation, I met a friend for lunch at a raw food cafe. I ordered a hemp burger with a side of mixed greens and left both more than half unfinished. The only redeeming quality to the experience was the raw chocolate macaroon. I bought one for my friend and I, and we stood at the counter enjoying them. I know how I get around chocolate. I make noises, usually close my eyes, and tilt my head back pretending I am a hair model in the Herbal Essences commercials. When I finished the macaroon, the guy behind the counter was looking at me. He smiled as if he had just seen me naked. Blushing, I excused myself to the bathroom, and while I was gone my friend slipped him my phone number.

He called a week later, asking if he could make me dinner and furthermore, would I like for him to bicycle over and pick me up for the date. I was so flattered by his creative planning, that I completely overlooked the menu he detailed. Vegan sweet potato and split pea soup. This was going to be a short-lived romance.

On our first date, we broke every rule in the dating book as far as conversation goes. We started with our beliefs about God and religion and worked our way back to favorite movies, books that changed our lives, and number of siblings. He confided in me that recently, he had undergone his own personal transformation. I was not prepared for what he was about to tell me. Apparently, on a random Charlotte night, he ate some hallucinogenic mushrooms that transported him to...The Center of The Universe.

He told me this later that night in his 97' turbo Saab with troll dolls sitting on the dashboard. He sprawled himself across the driver and passenger seat with his head prematurely in my lap. He looked up at me with those alien eyes you could only get if you *had* been to The Center of The Universe. He said it was the scariest thing he had ever done, but he was not scared anymore. I however had never been so terrified.

After his "psychedelic field trip," he revamped his diet, excluding everything that was not raw. He started a garden outside of the vegan restaurant he worked at and told me plants could talk to him, along with owls and hawks. His body was a third the size of mine. Where I had cushion, he had bone. I could work with bone, but I could not work with the split pea and sweet potato soup. It had nothing except vegetable bouillon, water, and the aforementioned vegetables. The texture got stuck on the roof of my mouth and my taste buds nosed around for flavors. Once I informed them that there would be no savory portion to the meal, they passed on the message to the rest of my stomach, which suddenly started to gurgle in an uproar of sorts, a gestalt, withdrawing its active participation in the meal.

After I released Rain to the hawks, owls, and plants, I returned with enthusiasm to prosciutto, gourmet burgers, and breakfast burritos with Grateful Grower's Sausage. Up until last week, I could not walk past a raw food restaurant, aisle, or a raw foodie without going into Anaphylactic shock. Its like my body remembers how hard it had to work to feign satisfaction and sustenance, to pretend that the taste of seaweed rice cakes or an avocado smoothie was gratifying.

But last week, I tried on a pair of my jeans and could not get them past my thighs. I felt angry and betrayed. As I lay on the cold hardwood floor in my hallway trying to button them, I realized that I had made the grave mistake of settling into a relationship and letting myself "go." I had seen others do it. Their self-care regime becomes slack. Their clothes get tight, their skin starts to sag, and the romance

dies. I let myself go all right. All the way to the next two pant sizes up.

I drove straight to Trader Joe's and stood in the produce aisle recalling the days of seaweed salads and grapefruit and ginger smoothies. I bought forty dollars worth of alkaline water, green vegetables, brown rice, fresh fruit, and Pine-Sol colored smoothies.

The next day, I stood at the refrigerator with the door wide open. The broccoli and zucchini stared at me with a look that said, "I want you back." I decided it was time to have *the conversation*. You know it, don't you? The *it's been a while since we broke up; maybe we can try and be friends* talk.

"Listen, our relationship was draining, physically and emotionally. I needed more. I was starving. I'm sorry I was immature about our breakup. Scoffing at the salad bar at Earth Fare while shoving a turkey club sandwich in my mouth is hardly taking the high road. I'm sorry about that. But the truth is that my new relationship isn't perfect either. It is expensive, and the weight gain is an unwelcome side effect. I didn't mean to cut you out completely, but I am a Leo and we are known for being loyal. I didn't think there was room for both of you."

I stood there for a minute in silence, the light from the refrigerator hitting my face. Bending over, I grabbed the broccoli and zucchini, and then stood up reaching into the freezer for the pork tenderloin.

.

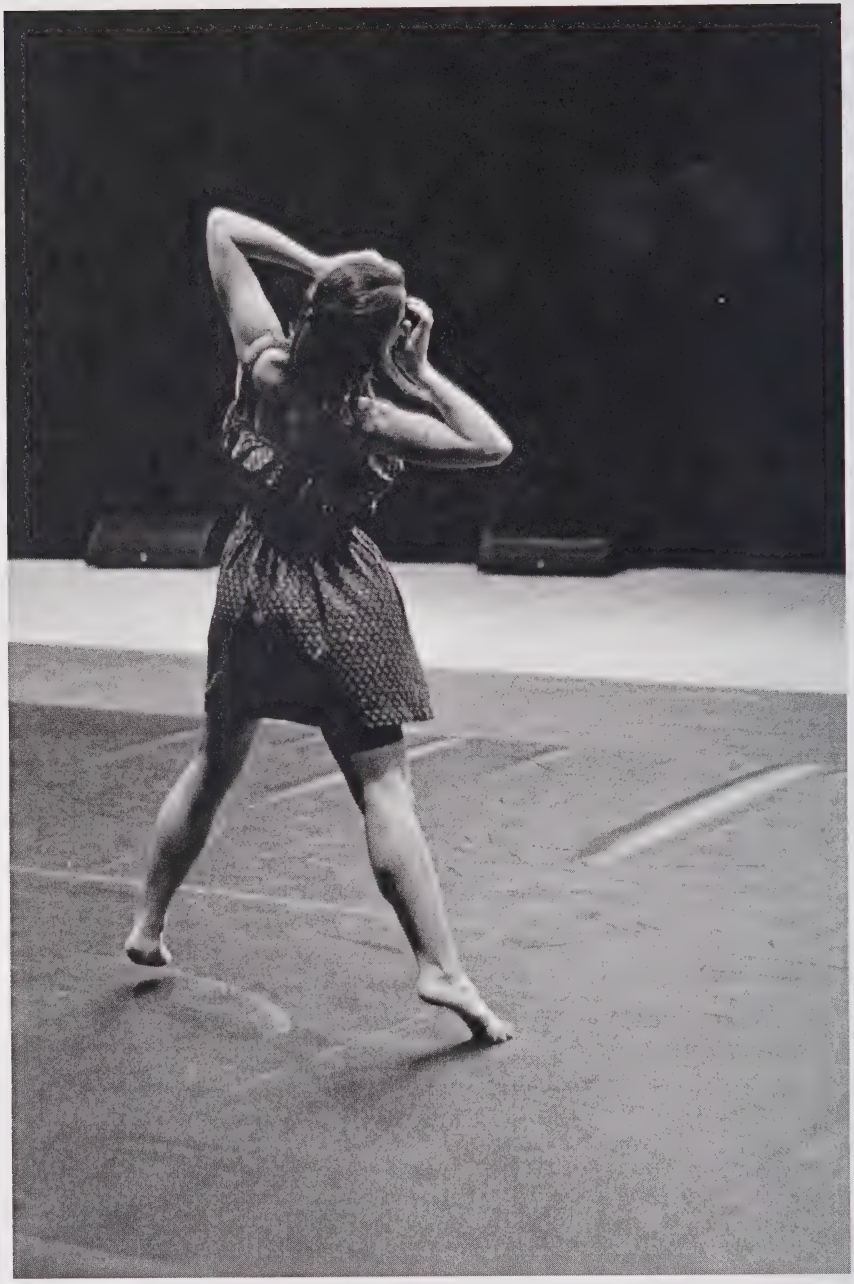
Living Alive

Jen Windland

I raised my glass to the couple
we were there to celebrate.
Toasted him, winked at his new wife,
Here's to the nights we felt alive.
He understood – that used to be us, alive;
I felt rotted, dead inside, watching them.
Toast finished, I tossed back my champagne
and left them behind
not expecting him to follow.
My heels and I clattered away from the hall,
the silky, hideous bride's maid's gown
making conversation with the sidewalk.
And then he was there, following,
speaking,
begging,
pleading.
Don't do this;
don't turn your back on me.
But there was no place in his new life
for the best friend
between him and his new wife.
What did he need me for now?
He was very much alive with her,
while I had trouble breathing without him.
Remember when? I questioned.
He understood, that used to be us.
Then here's to the nights we felt alive.
I breathed him in one last time,
tipped my invisible hat,
and let him go on living.

Awake My Soul

Jessie Hunt



Desecrate

Elizabeth Heffner

Desecrate my heart
Infiltrate my veins
Rip my soul apart
Awakened and insane.

Bludgeon me in kisses
Bury me in lust
Whip me with your words:
Charred smoke and bitter dust

I am but a pawn
In this never-ending chase
And you are just a shell
Looking for a pretty face.

An Explosion in the Bay

Bree Stallings

An old man's face, worn loose
like his untied boat shoes,
telling tales of hardships and joy,
lights up orange.
A deep rumble follows,
and he solemnly turns his head
to the smoke,
billowing from across the water.
He is observant, slow and wise
to see, but even his age and his
wrinkles don't hold back that
tiny hint of dismay.

A small house that sits on the bay,
the one in whose general direction I had said earlier,
"Look, so pretty."
It is on fire.

Cherry Grove Pier. This man and I,
though strangers, have shared many years here.
We both sit and watch,
inattentive to our bobbing fishing poles,
as the blackened puffs swirl from the horizon.
Neither one of us able to help,
and neither one trying to show the faint wonder,
"Was someone home?"

Haunted

Natalie Stewart

Some people swore that the house was haunted, but mama and I knew better. We moved in anyway, just the two of us, on my seventh birthday. Mama tied big red balloons to my new racecar bed in my brand new room. Mama and I had always shared a bed since Daddy left. I don't really remember much about him and Mama says that's probably best.

I was so excited to sleep in my new bed I practically begged for bedtime. Mama tucked me in nice and tight and sang me the song she sang to me every night:

"Hush little baby don't say a word,
Mommy's gonna buy you a mocking bird.
And if that mocking bird don't sing..."

I pretended to fall asleep so she would stop. She was an awful singer, but I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I woke up in the middle of the night when I heard creaking down the hall. It was an old house—Mama said it was built a hundred years ago, and we got a good deal 'cause it needed fixin' up, but we could do it together. I thought it was Mama coming to check on me like she did most every night, but when I got up to look down the hall all I saw was black—like the woods at night when you're not supposed to still be there, but you want to see a ghost so you stay anyway.

"Mama! Mama is that you?"

Nothing.

I was starting to get kinda scared, so I tumbled down the crooked grey-wood stairs to find Mama. I crawled into bed with her and put my hand on her chest to feel her heart go "thump, thump, thump." Satisfied, I fell back asleep beside Mama.

Later, I woke up thirsty and turned to Mama for some water, but Mama wasn't beside me anymore.

"Mama! Mama where are you?!"

Nothing.

I rubbed my eyes because they were burning but that didn't help—they kept burning.

"MAMA!"

The bedroom door was shut, so I turned the loose brass knob and pulled hard, but it wouldn't open. I pulled harder, but nothing.

"MAMA!"

The door was hot now and it smelled like when Mama forgot about the pizza and the kitchen got all smoky when she opened the oven. Since we were on the bottom floor I ran over to the window—it was so hot now. The window was open a little so I pushed it up just enough so I could squeeze out and jump in the back yard. I brushed the dirt off my pajamas 'cause Mama got mad when I got dirty, and I heard sirens far away. When I looked up there was fire going all the way from our house to the sky.

"MAMA!"

I was crying now. Red lights, sirens, orange flames, hot, so hot. *Where was Mama?* A big red fire truck pulled up to the house and the men pulled huge hoses out and poured water everywhere. When the police came they asked me a bunch of questions, but I didn't understand.

"Son, do you have any family here?"

"No, just Mama."

"Well, Officer Susan here is going to take you somewhere safe for the night. Son, we didn't find anyone in the house—are you sure your Mama didn't leave tonight?" the policeman said.

I just shook my head and whispered:

"Hush little baby,

Don't say a word.

Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird…"

Flying Away

Brynn Feeney

I remember Gram told us that Payne Road hadn't always been paved. Twenty years ago, when she and Granddad first moved there, it was still gravel. I suppose between now and then the Town Board of Ravena decided to renovate, and laid the rocky crumbs over with asphalt. Gram said it was wonderful, because the gravel had never been good for car tires. I couldn't relate, seeing as New York State law doesn't allow drivers under sixteen. I was only ten, but I knew what a bumpy ride felt like.

"If nothing ever changed, there'd be no butterflies."— Unknown

My mother said that when I was young, I struggled with adjustments, especially those which I couldn't control. At three, I was the girl screaming at the wind to stop blowing because it was lifting the pleats of my blue, printed floral dress. Mom had turned to Gram with a smile and said, "There you have it, Brynn Feeney takes on Mother Nature." I laugh about this now, partly for humor's sake, but mostly for the irony of it. I wonder who I thought I was anyway.

Though I once scorned April breezes for disrupting the folds of my petticoat, I always marveled in watching the seasons shift from summer to fall, and back again. I'd perch on the loveseat in front of the kitchen windows, and gaze out at the street, noting the contrasts from when I'd looked last. July was beautiful and lush, although September was my true favorite. In summertime, green-leaved branches of sugar maples draped across the road, giving shade to passersby and casting shadows that fluttered in the wind. They twirled and unfurled with grace, akin to butterflies mid-flight.

Months would pass, driving in cold weather that tinted the leaves to pigments of orange and fire-engine red. Slowly, the tainted leaves would fall, leaving late November bare. Their crinkled remains, which had once painted the road with hues of a sunset, littered the blacktop and curled up within themselves, like burned paper. I hated this time most, not just for the temperature drop, but for the loss of my butterflies. Lying in ruins and withered heaps of what used to be, they owned a hopeless condition. I pitied them, considering despair, and how it might feel. I supposed it was comparable to an underground trap, with no escape, or a nightmare, from which I couldn't wake. Little did I know that years from then, depression would become not only a state of mind, but my closest friend.

"I only ask to be free. The butterflies are free." ~Charles Dickens

There were always butterflies on the road. In the springtime, we kids roamed the fields by Gram's house and searched for monarchs. Unfortunately, all we usually found were ticks. I don't know why we wanted the butterflies so bad to be honest. A butterfly is a butterfly. But, my cousin, Christine, said that monarchs were more wonderful than the other types. Well, she didn't exactly say it, but she made it clear. So, we looked only for monarchs. We spent such a long time

looking, and we never caught one. I don't know that we really wanted to catch one anyway. We had no clue what we would do with it. I bet we'd let it go. I doubt any of us had enough spite to trap a creature only made to be free.

Some days, if the hay grass wasn't too tall, my then six-year-old brother, Slade, and I took walks in the fields between our house and Gram's. This was only because Mom didn't want us walking on the road. She feared the cars more than we did. Still, we felt like big kids, abandoning the confines of our front yard to explore a world known to everyone but us. But little did everyone know, especially the grownups, that there were things we kept from them too, like what we really learned at school, and the distance our imaginations carried us.

We are like butterflies who flutter for a day and think it is forever. ~Carl Sagan

I won't say it was unexpected. I think in a small way, I saw it coming. My emotional breakdown was in college, but I'd been unhappy since I turned seventeen. For two years, I cried myself to sleep almost every night. And I didn't find it strange. I told absolutely no one, especially not my mother. I feared she'd be upset with me, or worse, blame herself. For in Mom's mind, if there was something plaguing me, then as a parent, it was her fault. Well, she was wrong. No one can take responsibility for things she cannot control.

My sadness stemmed from a hole within that I couldn't fill with accolades or praise. To most, I was an overachiever. But I, alone, counted what I believed were failures as a daughter, a student, and a human being. I scorned my inabilities to fix my family's lack of money, to ease the tension that afflicted our household, and pay for my own education. My parents struggled to maintain composure under the constant stress, and fought with one another in response. Watching them falter, my insides grew cold. At school, I pushed myself to excel, but I always felt inferior. I did well, although not well enough. I was popular, yet I couldn't find friends. Each day felt like a marathon, and at night, I dreaded the next. Often, I prayed that I'd go to sleep and never wake up again.

Just like the butterfly, I too will awaken in my own time. ~Deborah Chaskin

We left so many secrets out there, between the fields and Payne Road. Things we said, stolen by the wind, and things we did, seen only by the sloping trees that hung low over the blacktop. It was our stab at freedom, for though the road was exhilarating, it was also restricting. We could come and go, but we could never really leave. I'd often sit on the small hill beside our driveway and stare out at the street for a while, dreaming about places beyond those which I could see. Closing my eyes, I pretended that instead of Brynn, I was a butterfly. With wings and boundless free will, I might go and be with the existence I feared I was missing. I yearned for the world, and I liked to believe that it also yearned for me.

"See me roam,
See me climb,
If I leave here now
I can make good time.
See me fall,

See me rise,
Grabbing one last look,
Then I'll wave goodbye,
Goodbye (Steadman)."

Longing, that's what the road was for me. It was all the things I had, but didn't perceive, and a pathway to the glory I thought life to be. Almost every morning, I'd gaze out those kitchen windows, creating mental fairytales to make believe that I was somewhere else. I wanted next-door neighbors and friends close by. I craved city streets and wild lights in a kaleidoscope of color. A need for vivacity sparked inside me. The feeling grew until it engulfed my heart in curiosity. When I finally left Payne Road to pursue a collegiate education, it wasn't liberating, but bittersweet. Confused, I struggled to connect the dots between what I'd held and what I'd missed. Maybe, it was the quiet rustle of leaves from unseen breezes, or the pretty scene in warm weather, when pink blossoms adorned the cherry trees. Except that I could see those anywhere. I wondered then, if it weren't the aesthetics I missed, but rather that particular view, my view.

I believed I became a butterfly when I'd gone. I finally accessed the route to emancipation. I took flight and soared far. I never thought to glimpse back. In grief, I realized my mistake. My wings were exposed, but I'd forgotten to say goodbye.

Amplified Silence

Nicole Pietrantonio

As a child I would sleep through the beating
rain on my window screen,
the palm-leaves blowing in a gust of wind,
the individual murmurs of my grandparents,
and my father's snores—a grunting pig
moving towards its trough.
The comforting soundtrack of my childhood
allowed me to sleep soundly.

Now alone,
in a dark room
with no other rooms beside mine
the unfamiliar noises keep me
audibly awake.

the static in the air exhales like human breaths.
The computer whispers
like a seething tea-kettle on the stove,
and my third-floor neighbor's vacuum
hums a raspy lullaby.

In the swollen black and blue of the night
I fight to impair my mind's eye
from seeing the headlines of rapes,
murders, and young women missing.

In the darkness—
the hush of sight amplifies silence
tire-treads sound like harmonica reeds,
heavy dips in my neurotic barkers breathing,
and the murmur of my heartbeat
as it palpitates through the fibers of my shirt.

Que Una Donna Respira

Jordan Roberts

Pardon her failure to make the mind choose,
As the quo denies her the right to refuse.
Timidity wears a mask of the sublime;
A facade of indifference blankets conclusive crime.
The seamless woman gives words without qualm,
Yet barricades heart on pretense of Psalms.
Benchmarks consume her, never foul art of bedposts.
She salvages admissions for the Heavenly Hosts.
Fear can drive her, but fear destroys too;
Manifestations within others prove this to be true.
Her obsession cradles nostalgia as she aspires to progress,
She respires dignity beneath the ribs of her chest.
Lively pupils and remarks doused in wit
Shade vulnerability more than she will admit.
My passion overtures in beats of love,
As I am the woman found above.
I proceed as a foe of my mind's own rants;
A rosy-cheeked child with some sort of chance.

A Biography of the Reedy Creek Dam

Natalie Stewart

One small crack begs for a second glance, but to no triumph.
The sun has peeked its head over the hill a dozen times since.
Slowly, but with much assurance—an inch has become a foot.
The crack spreads like a great wildfire.
Cement begins to give way to the ice-cold pressure,
A burst and a glorious break.
The edifice explodes into fist-sized rocks—pounding every inch of the quarry.
We look up to see if Noah is hovering above,
But he is nowhere in sin's sight.
Oh God what reason then do you have,
To wash all this life away.

Commas

Kathleen Wile

Commas between clauses
said the teacher because
splices are unacceptable trying to tie together topics that
don't coordinate
your conjunctions so the two can
live together in peace and
harmony is what your sentence should contain
she said why
should the independent clause love another when
they don't have anything in comma on
the test because
the subordinating comes first
the comma follows and is more
appropriate
and fits the pen-sivere
and harsh mood she felt when
she told us to use commas
nevertheless,
the independent clause chose to live
without,
and so it must remain.

Remember the Fallen

Khoury Beshara

The Breathing Place

Brynn Feeney

There was more reading done than cooking,
Often arguments over laughter.
Such an unkempt room it was
With papers strewn across the cold, hard countertops.
The wildflowers in the tinted vase dulled from green to brown
And we never changed them.
Grandma used to walk through Sunday mornings,
Shaking her head at the sight.
She wanted to fix it,
But it wasn't her kitchen.
Those were the days I sat by the windowsill
For a better view of life,
And missed Catholic churches,
Like the one in New York City.
I remembered the stained-glass window
With light streaming through,
Where it sat high above the entry door
And lit the stones that echoed quiet.
Saint John caught in the center of color
Preaching the lonely Christian.
I wanted to go back and sit there in a pew
Just to close my eyes and listen.

Quickening

Courtney Varnum

Some dead children have Peter Pan ghosts,
I have heard them tapping at my windows.

I used to dream of dead children still alive—
a small cluster of cells,
yellow-orange and glowing,
hardly amassed in a womb
not ready
for life just yet.

That same old tapping startles me,
my old dream fades out,
and I realize that fluttering
anxiety—flitting and darting
like points of light
attempting to catch a shadow
of something, anything—
that which I thought was a dream,
was you.

A year later, I've grown up—
bought a house, got a real
job and forgot how to dream.
I don't dream anything now.

Ode to Da Vinci

Josi Bloch

Duck and Cover, The Spirit is Descending

Courtney Varnum

I looked forward to those mornings when
my mother, perched at the top of the stairs, would scream
Jehovah's! Get Down!

Born too late
for the Cold war,
it was the closest I'd ever get
to replicating "duck and cover."

My child wasn't old enough to play the
Cold War game yet, so I always opened the door.
Monica and Pernice and I sipped coffee.
I got Splenda packets the day before,
Pernice doesn't take sugar in her coffee.

Every Wednesday we three had our little
Bible study. We would eat scones and sip coffee and we'd
talk about God and what a good friend He is,
such a good friend we don't have to just call Him God,
we can call Him by his first name.

I once belonged to a Pentecostal Church.
Saturday nights I would actually pray.
My head tilted in reverence, hands clasped
tight, I would ask that someone speak in tongues,
reassuring God it shouldn't be me.

Romp of the Mind

Nicole Pietrantonio

Reality pulls the steady rhythm out
of making love—fingers fidget
for the blouse button that won't
come undone, the hook
that won't unclasp from the eye.
Self-conscious geometry questions
where to place the hands, lips and angled leg.

The mind fuck is a waxed apple,
firm brilliant skin, beautiful to look at.
Reality, is the apple pelt you bite into,
not as firm and tart as you assumed.

Bent over, by the vending machine
anonymity reached in
for perspiring Sunkist.
Her blonde biological imprint now secured
in her onlookers mind.

Spreading the petals he dug in
for the tart milky nectar
of the imagined sexual undertaking.
No need to undress, her bare breasts
illusively appeared, cupped in his steady hands.

The moan of sneakers and flapped laces
on uneven cement interrupted
his mental percussion.
As anonymity approached,
she glared, feeling violated
by the onlookers smile.

Confidence escaped him, he fumbled his balance
against the chain link construction yard fence
in the departure from figment to reality.

Mysterious Noises from the Next Room

Travis S. Mullis

"Behold, I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard: I cry aloud, but there is no judgment."
The Book of Job
Chapter 19:Verse 7

I

Samuel Allenowski awoke in the early morning hours to the terrible noises of the old man in the apartment next door. These vicious noises began with a strange rumble from the diaphragm that traveled up the throat and belched forth in chaotic rattles. The sounds forced their way into Samuel's room and left him wide awake and eager for sleep. Getting out of bed, Samuel approached the wall of his room and began banging on it with his fists, the sides of his hands torn and slightly bloodied.

"Shut up in there. I'm trying to sleep."

These strange noises, these terrible noises, had been keeping Samuel awake for two weeks, ever since he had moved into the apartment. Samuel had gotten a new job as a copy editor at a textbook company and had found the apartment to be well within his price range. Naturally, he had not known about this mysterious old man who lived next door and never left his room, and never stopped coughing his terrible coughs, and never answered Samuel when he yelled at him to shut up. The landlord had not mentioned this man, this invalid who seemed to suffocate on existence.

The rooms in this apartment building were small but advertised as cozy. Each apartment was more or less a cold-water flat, one large room that contained a small kitchenette, an even smaller bathroom, a desk, shelves, and a bed that creaked and moaned with the slightest movement. Samuel did not object to the size of the room, but to the thickness of the walls which seemed to be poorly insulated, if they were insulated at all. Every night around midnight the moaning would begin and would not cease until Samuel pounded on the wall for several minutes. He had tried everything to keep the old man's noises out. He had shoved towels into the door crack, plugged his ears with cotton, taken several different kinds of sleeping pills; nothing had worked except Samuel's vocal protests and vicious wall beatings. In the morning and through the day it was utterly silent, nothing could be heard from his neighbor, not a sound.

This particular night the coughs were laced with incoherent cries. Was this man dying, perpetually dying? Perhaps he was a ghost. Perhaps it was some cruel joke the landlord was playing on him, the new resident. Maybe the landlord did this to every new resident.

"Old man, you be quiet in there. There's people who have to work in the morning, people who can't afford to spend their precious sleeping hours listening to your awful vocal eruptions."

The old man didn't answer. Samuel's ear was pressed against the wall. He couldn't hear any movement but the noises had not ceased.

"Please be quiet. Do you need help? Are you sick? Should I call an ambulance for you? Huh? Well?"

Still no answer. Samuel threw his arms in the air and started pacing his room in a nervous frenzy. After a few minutes of deliberation, Samuel opened his door and went out into the hallway. He approached his neighbor's door. The old man had gone silent. Samuel began to bang on the door and violently rattle the door knob.

"Real funny, you old jackass. Quit fucking around. This is ridiculous. Are you insane? This isn't some game, you old fart. I have to be well rested for my job. I need my sleep. I work for a living. What do you do?"

No answer. Only silence. This sent Samuel into a further rage and he jumped in the air and grabbed his head and moved it side to side like a fast-moving pendulum.

"Fuck it. Whatever. Burn in hell, you old shit. Geesh."

Samuel shook his head and went back into his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

II

The next morning, Samuel was late for work and went through the entire day in a dreamy haze. While he was at his desk he would nod asleep and nap for as long as was possible. That afternoon, Samuel made his way home, opened the door to his bedroom, climbed into bed, and fell into ecstatic slumber. He was not awakened that night by the noises. For once he slept straight through it. No one could have woken him that night.

The next night was another showdown between the old man and Samuel. At 12:03 Samuel awoke to the coughs and groans of the old man next door. He rolled over in his bed and stared at the ceiling in a questioning manner.

"What have I done to deserve this? Who have I offended? I just want to be left alone so I can live my life in peace. Is that so much to ask? Have I overstepped my existential bounds? This man, he must be some demon. He must be."

The racket continued and Samuel just laid there till he could take it no more. Rising from bed, he opened his door and went out into the hall. The hall was poorly-lighted and stank of mothballs; the paint on the walls was peeling off and had revealed plaid wallpaper underneath that made Samuel queasy. Samuel approached the old man's door once more and threw his entire weight into it, all 150 pounds of his flesh breaking against the plywood and layered board. Recoiling from the blow, he threw his body at the door again but it would not budge. The noises stopped and Samuel stood there with tears streaming down his face. He could only shake his head. Turning away from the old man's door, Samuel went back to his bed and the dreams that waited for him there.

Samuel's landlord, a Mr. Bandini, did not live in the apartment building he owned. Indeed, he did not even live in the same city as the apartment building he owned. Mr. Bandini had left his home phone number on cards in every room hoping that no one would ever feel the need to call him for any reason. He was, of course, not so lucky. Samuel remembered this card the morning after he had tried to knock down the old man's door. It rang, and rang, and rang, and then went to an answering machine with Mr. Bandini's booming voice commanding all callers to not leave a message and try the number again later. Samuel ignored this command and left a rather strongly worded plea for help in order to save his sanity and possibly his life. After hanging up the phone and pacing the room, Samuel approached the

mirror next to the ancient toilet and began to stare at his image in the mirror.

His face had grown pale in the last few days. The usually large bags under his eyes had expanded to take up more of the cheek space that spread out from his mouth to ear. His hair was unkempt and oily. By nature he very rarely washed his hair, thinking it would prevent dandruff. It didn't. He had lost weight since the groans next door had begun. The bones in his face looked like they were trying to fight their way out of his skin. To make this horrid visage truly haggard, a thin glaze had thrown itself across his green eyes. Unhappy with the reflection in the mirror, Samuel grimaced and turned back to his desk to think. I have to get some help, he thought, but who could help me? And then he remembered his last best hope, Rabbi Judah, a man who had an answer for every question. The Rabbi had helped Samuel through hard times before, his parent's deaths, his sexual awakening, his first girlfriend, and now he would be able to silence this old man, to exorcise his demons. However, Samuel was not ready to consult the old Rabbi. Rabbi Judah was for dire emergencies. First, he must talk to this Mr. Bandini and find out who this man next door really was.

So, Samuel called the landlord every hour for 30 hours. Finally, Mr. Bandini called Samuel back.

"Is this Samuel Allenowski of Room 333?"

"Yes, Mr Bandini, this is he."

"Listen here you little jerk; my phone is not 911. I'm sorry it took so long for me to get back to you. With that said, I don't appreciate you calling me like the place was on fire. Is the place on fire, Mr. Allenowski?"

"No, But-"

"I know it isn't. So don't call me so much and clog up my answering machine, okay?"

"Look, I know it seems weird. I know you probably think I am weird."

"Ha. Probably?"

"But I have a real problem here, Mr. Bandini. The old man who lives next door to me will not stop his god awful, lung-wrenching, nursing home moans. All night he does it. He has woken me up almost every night for more than two weeks now. I pound on the wall and he doesn't listen. He never comes to the door. He never answers me in any way. I just want to know who the hell this guy is, what's wrong with him, and how I can shut him up. Please. Please. I beg you to help me. This has to stop."

Mr. Bandini was silent for a few seconds before he started to lightly chuckle and sigh.

"You think you're funny, wise guy? Huh? You think you can jerk my chain like this? Is this some kind of joke to you? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the old *putzer* next door to me. You're telling me no one else complains about this guy? Is everyone else deaf?"

"Don't raise your voice with me, Mr. Allenowski. Don't you dare."

"Okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Can you please help me out?"

"I don't know what's wrong with you. No one lives next door to you, Mr. Allenowski. No one. There is no old man anywhere on that hall. No one has lived in that room for Nine months. You're imagining stuff, kid."

"Are *you* kidding with me? I swear to you there is some old man who lives next door to me. I'm not crazy. I'm not. Every night he does this, every night. I'm

not making it up. You have to believe me."

"I am a busy man and I own several apartment buildings, all of which have various *legitimate* problems I must attend to. Please stop jerking my chain."

"Come and see for yourself. Come open up the room and witness this annoyance first hand. I swear I'm telling the truth. I'm just gonna keep calling if it happens again. Just keep on calling."

"I ain't driving an hour to listen to you yakkety-yak about some old man's coughs. And you know what? You call me again and you're out of the building. You want me to kick you out?"

"No. Please, I need help. Please. I'm going crazy here, Mr. Bandini."

"You are crazy, kid. There's no one in the room next to you, no one. And you call me again and you're out of here, understood?"

"Fine. Fine. Whatever. I'll seek help elsewhere."

"Yeah, try an insane asylum. Good day, Mr. Allenowski."

And before Samuel could answer, Mr. Bandini slammed the receiver home. Samuel dropped the phone and fell back on his bed.

III

Samuel was all alone it seemed. After speaking with the landlord; Samuel went door to door on his hall and asked if anybody had heard these old man's moans and cries. No one had heard a thing. They would just shake their heads and grin like Samuel was crazy. Back in his room, Samuel decided he was running out of options. He needed Rabbi Judah. He needed a man of God. The time had come at last.

So, that night Samuel went to sleep hoping he would not be woken up, hoping he wouldn't have to call the *Rebbe*. Once again, the moans came forth like tsunami waves and broke over Samuel's ears, taking him out of sleep and over to the telephone on his desk.

Samuel's Rabbi, Rabbi Judah, was a middle-aged man who was fading rapidly into old age. Samuel had been coming to the Rabbi with his problems since he was 8. The Rabbi, no matter how tired he was, would always listen to Samuel, often for several hours. Rabbi Judah was a kind man, a forgiving man, a man prone to always say he was sorry even if he wasn't in the wrong. He was soft-spoken and never raised his voice above a whisper. Something mysterious had happened to Rabbi Judah in the past few years. His hair had turned white in a matter of months, his skin began to hang looser and looser on his bones, age splotches appeared all over him, and his eyes became covered with a rheumy mist that gave him the look of the blind prophet Tiresias. In effect, he had become an old man in everything except age. Through it all, even the disgusted looks of some of the children in Hebrew school, Rabbi Judah persisted in his good nature. Some said he was just in denial. Others said he secretly drank massive amounts of Manischewitz to buoy himself against life's hardships. And the boldest of all claimed that it was Samuel Allenowski's constant struggles and late night counseling sessions that caused this premature aging. It was uncertain. However, Rabbi Judah had grown accustomed to Samuel's idiosyncrasies and the late night sessions held with Samuel in his office.

Samuel was a Jew in ethnicity only. He had abandoned the religious dogma as nothing more than the mad ramblings of half-literate goat herders. He enjoyed the cultural aspects of Judaism and nothing else. Rabbi Judah was aware of Samuel's

disbelief and disdainful of its immoral implications. Rabbi Judah had grown used to these sessions but it did not mean he enjoyed them. They left the Rabbi with terrible migraines and an upset stomach that persisted for hours. Samuel was a grade-A *kibitzer*, plain and simple.

It was 4:13 am when Samuel walked into the Rabbi's ancient office and sat down in front of the large mahogany desk.

"Thank you so much, Rabbi Judah. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I need your help. I swear I'm going crazy."

"That doesn't surprise me, Samuel."

"I know it's late and you're a busy man but this is urgent, very urgent. It's the most bizarre thing I have ever encountered. I don't know what to do. My landlord thinks I'm insane. My neighbors think I am insane."

"And why would they think that, Samuel?"

And so Samuel told him everything. Rabbi Judah nodded periodically and thumbed through his *Tanakh* for help from the scriptures. Samuel gesticulated wildly, his hands going every which direction, while he paced around the Rabbi's office. When he was done he sat down in front of the Rabbi and awaited his advice in a huffy silence. Rabbi Judah stared at him for several minutes, a look of prolonged agony stretched across his face.

"You should pray, Samuel. Good night."

"Oh, come one. Really? That's all you got for me? Pray? I don't pray. I haven't prayed in 10 years."

"Maybe that's your problem."

"Maybe, but you have to give me more than that."

"All the Lord wants of you is for you to be a good Jew. Simple as that. Live an ethical life. Be obedient to God. Pray often and well. Go forth and multiply. I don't know what else to tell you, Samuel. Is this true? Are you sick? Is this some tale you have made up? I don't understand. This old man never leaves his room?"

"I have never seen him outside of his room. He never comes to the door when I knock. It doesn't even seem like he moves at all."

"How do you know he is an old man?"

"I don't *know*. It just seems like he's old. He coughs a lot and he seems to be dying or something. It's just a guess. I guess he could be young. Maybe."

Rabbi Judah closed his eyes and breathed slowly.

"Samuel, I am a patient man, I am. But now you are testing that patience. You come to me all the time with problems, outlandish problems, these fantastic tales of woe. You're just imagining this old man. You need to go see a psychiatrist. And why don't you ever come to synagogue? Do you care about religion? Have you turned your back on God? I'm sorry, it is very late."

Samuel stood up suddenly.

"GOD DAMNIT. I am not making this up. It's real. I'm scared. Come to my apartment and listen. You have to believe me."

"Don't swear. Why are you swearing?"

"But don't you realize the weight of this situation? This is of Biblical proportions."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is."

"Good night, Samuel. Pray and pray often. Maybe the Lord will take pity

on you and save you from this terrible old man. Be a good Jew. Be upright and righteous. Good night."

"I need more than superstitions, Rabbi Judah."

Rabbi Judah's head was in his hands, his face lined in pain. His face was growing redder as he yanked at his beard in quick and deliberate motions.

"Samuel, I am sorry I can give you no more advice than that. I just can't do it. I don't feel well. Please, just leave."

"Look, I'll come to synagogue every week. I need help. I really need help."

Samuel was bending over Rabbi Judah, his hands clasped together in a begging gesture. The Rabbi's face was grimacing in agony before him, the veins in his head were flexing back and forth as his face became purple. Then the Rabbi began to moan and put his hand on the *Tanakh* open on his desk.

"Take the book, Samuel."

Those were the only words he could get out before falling back in his armchair. Picking up the phone, Samuel dialed for an ambulance. He could only watch as his breathing slowed and stopped. Rabbi Judah was dead. Samuel had watched him die and could do nothing but scream and flail his arms.

IV

After Rabbi Judah's death, Samuel bought a *mezuzah* and nailed it to his door frame to ward off evil spirits, as this was surely what this old man was, an evil spirit. He opened the *Tanakh* the *Rebbe* had given him and read from it at different intervals. He skimmed his way through it, reading what he liked, skipping what he didn't. He liked the *Book of Job* best of all. That poor old *schmuck* could never catch a break. The night after Rabbi Judah died; the old man was completely silent, as if he was showing his respect for the fallen holy man. Ironically enough, Samuel could not sleep the night of the old man's silence. He was too busy thinking of the implications of Rabbi Judah's death, how his death had confirmed Samuel's belief that God was punishing him for being a bad Jew. Samuel prayed for hours that night and fell asleep at his desk, awakening at 7:00 am, just in time for work and a long day of thinking.

Two nights after Rabbi Judah's death, the moaning next door turned into screams of pain, a full out assault on Samuel's sanity. Even stranger, the old man was babbling in Hebrew. Random Hebrew words were strung together by the old man and tossed out at the world. Samuel had learned Hebrew as a child; Rabbi Judah had taught him and all the Jewish children of his synagogue; however, Samuel had forgotten most of it from infrequent use and could only pick up a few words now and then. The screams became so maddening that Samuel had to leave the apartment and wander the city streets till dawn, sitting on random curbs in his baggy pajamas, staring longingly at the prostitutes who passed him by.

V

Feeling more alone than ever, Samuel ventured throughout his building looking for someone to talk to about the old man next door. At last he came to a room on the first floor that was set apart from the others. It was Room 1 and the occupant nameplate read: Mr. Gabriel Howards, Custodial Engineer. Samuel knocked and heard a voice from inside mumbling to itself.

"One moment please. Just doing a bit of work."

"Mr. Howards, this is Samuel Allenowski from 333. I hope I'm not bothering you."

Mr. Howards opened the door.

"Please, come in. I don't often have visitors."

Samuel stepped into the room and looked Mr. Howards up and down. He was an old man hunched over and close to the ground. His face was clean shaven and his old homburg was tilted to the back of his head, exposing a bald patch. The room was small and on the table sat a large model of the apartment building. Various tools were scattered here and there. A small icebox and army cot stood in the corner next to a sink.

"Would you care for some milk, Mr. Allenowski? I'm afraid it is all I drink."

"No. No, thank you."

Samuel kept scanning the room, eyeing the numerous ticket stubs that were glued to the ceiling.

"Excuse me for asking, but why have you come to see me, Mr. Allenowski? Pardon my rudeness. I don't get many visitors. None actually."

"I'm sorry. I know you're gonna think I'm crazy. I might be crazy. I don't think I am. In fact, I'm sure I'm not—"

"I don't think you're crazy, Mr. Allenowski. A lot of people think I'm crazy too."

"Well, to be honest; I'm looking for a friend."

Mr. Howards made his way to the model on the table and picked up the small paintbrush resting on the edge. He grinned.

"No friends, huh? I know what that's like."

Samuel watched as he ran the paintbrush over the model in various locations. He went to the sink and washed his brushes before returning to the model and picking up a scalpel knife. He went to the third floor of the model to the room next to Samuel's, the old man's room. The room in the model was empty.

"That's the room next to me. Is it unfinished?"

Mr. Howards stopped sculpting with the scalpel knife.

"No. I'm just saving that room for last. The old man won't let me in anyway."

Samuel couldn't believe what he had heard.

"You can hear the old man too?"

"Oh yes, he's been making an awful racket these past few months. An awful racket."

Samuel's voice was quaking now. His hands were shaking as he ran them through his hair.

"And what does he say to you?"

"That's private."

"You don't know how happy this makes me. You and me are the only people that can hear him. Everyone else thinks I'm nuts."

"I know. It's awful frustrating isn't it?"

"It is. It is. But, who do you think he is, Mr. Howards?"

"Call me Gabriel. And I don't know who he is. My best guess is he's some kind of angel sent with some kind of message." He paused, his head bowing lower. His head was shaking from side to side. "Don't you think?"

"I don't know who he is. I just want him to leave me alone. I can't sleep. I

can't even think anymore."

Gabriel kept on working on the model, going through each room and taking out the tiny furniture and brushing it off with a duster.

"I'm afraid I can't help you kid. All I can tell you is to listen harder. He'll stop one day. Truth is there's always been something spooky about this old building. You might be asking yourself why I'm building this model."

"The question crossed my mind."

"Well, let me tell you, this old building has a lot of strange stuff happen in it. Doors appear and disappear. Noises late at night. Bright lights from certain rooms. Voices and whispers late at night. No one hears them except me."

"Me too."

"You too. My point is...something isn't quite right about this place. I aim to figure it out. I've been surveying this building for years and recreating it here in this model. That room next to you is just about the only place I can't get."

"I can't get in either. What should I do, Gabriel? What is happening?"

Gabriel sat down on his cot. He chewed his gums while he thought.

"I don't rightly know, Samuel. All I know to do is wait. I've been waiting for a long time myself."

"What are you waiting on?"

"I don't really know. God I suppose."

"I don't think I can wait, Gabriel."

"You have to have faith. That or move out."

"No. I can't move out now. I have to confront this old man."

Gabriel stretched out on the cot and put his hands behind his head. His wrinkled eyelids shut slowly. Feeble whispers, little prayers and such, were escaping the man's lips as he breathed in and out.

"I'm awful tired, Samuel. I think I'll take a nap now."

"What does God want, Gabriel?"

Gabriel smiled and looked at Samuel slyly.

"We will never know, kid."

Samuel shut the door to Gabriel's room and stood in the hall. He wasn't crazy. And yet, he still didn't know what to do, how to shut the old man up. Samuel walked down the hall to the lobby and made his way out into the streets. After several minutes of mindless walking he stopped in front of a synagogue. Staring up at the giant Star of David above the door, he went inside.

His time in the synagogue was brief. He stared up at the altar and tried to pray. The prayers rattled around in his head like loose change. None of them settled long enough for Samuel to recite them. Giving up quickly, Samuel headed back out to the street, the cackle of an old man from inside the synagogue trailing in his wake. Samuel made his way homeward in a rather slow manner, stopping at intervals to stare into the passing store front windows, his eyes scanning the objects displayed there before moving on in abject distraction. The cityscape stretched out before Samuel like a blinking light tapestry capped by soaring structures, the many different colors dazzling his eyes in phantasmagoric rapture before they all flickered out one by one and shadow's dark cloak entwined Samuel in a moving cave. The city was evaporating into the wider universe all around Samuel. Helplessly hoping he would be able to grope around in the dark for the city's electrical switch, his hands fumbled over the concrete, asphalt, and steel till he came to the door of

his apartment building and pushed inward, falling into the lobby of the building. As if by accident, Samuel found himself in his bed several hours later, his room a darkened tomb around him.

Samuel's life began to revolve around reciting his own *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer of mourning. Sleep eluded Samuel, slipping off into other rooms, other places. Nothing would come to Samuel but the screams and Hebrew sermons of the old man next door. Occasionally, Samuel would risk a glimpse out the window. The cityscape and crowning sky had disappeared and were replaced with an absolute darkness, a thick brushstroke of midnight black. The world was collapsing at last, wrapped up in divine warfare rained down from a fiery sky.

And that's when Samuel began to concede to the belief he had had all along, that his life was coming to an untimely end, that the world as he had known had been sandblasted away by a vengeful God who had come to personally drag Samuel to Hell.

VI

And then there was silence for a week. The old man's noises went dormant, or so it seemed. He was silent for so long that Samuel half-believed he had been redeemed at last. But of course, he was not so lucky. Eight days after the night with Gabriel, the old man opened up his lungs and let forth booming renditions of the Hebrew Scriptures. Samuel had bought a translation guide and would listen through cotton-plugged ears as the old man would recite passages from *Job*, *Samuel*, *Amos*, *Deuteronomy*, and *Leviticus*. Samuel prayed more and more. His weight had dropped precipitously. He had not shaved in weeks. He spent his days curled up in a ball in the corner of his room, nodding his head back and forth and praying. God will come for me, he thought. Samuel began to believe that the rest of his life would be spent listening to this old man's recitations of scripture. For a while, a short while, Samuel came to accept this fact, that he would live his life a perpetual prisoner in a self-imposed hell.

However, the spell was broken when after many days of the recitations; a knock came at the door. Samuel could hardly believe what he was hearing. He had forgotten there were other sounds in the universe besides this old man. He rose to his feet and stumbled over to the door. Opening the door just slightly, Samuel poked his hand out into the hall and grasped the envelope that was placed there.

"This was found with Rabbi Judah's personal belongings. It is a scrap of paper with some words addressed to you. We think the Rabbi wanted you to have it. I think it might help you."

And the messenger disappeared down the hall. Samuel pulled his hand back into the room and lightly shut the door. With unsteady hands, Samuel ripped open the envelope and read the scrap inside. It was in the *Rebbe*'s handwriting and said, "Samuel, I believe this quote might help you. I know it has helped me: 'The meaning of life is that it stops.'"

Samuel read through the scrap many times before throwing it on the floor and grabbing a knife that had materialized in one of the drawers in his kitchenette. Running towards the wall that separated the old man's and Samuel's apartments, he began plunging the knife into the wall that both Samuel's and the old man's apartment shared. The wall came apart in great chunks, plaster and paint falling to the floor at Samuel's feet. He had little strength but used what little strength he did have to get through that wall to the old man on the other side. But for every

piece of sheetrock that Samuel chipped away, another took its place. The wall was determined to defeat Samuel, to beat him back into a servile submission. After a few minutes of the futile attack, Samuel stretched out on his bed and fell asleep. He didn't wake for several hours.

VII

When Samuel woke, the chunks of sheetrock and paint had disappeared. The knife was also gone. Strangest of all, the old man next door was calling his name in a deep and familiar voice, his own. Rising from his sleep, Samuel walked into the hall and found the door to the old man's room cracked ever so slightly. He reached for the knob and gently threw the door open. The voice from within faded.

The old man's room was completely empty except for a chair where the old man sat motionless and a table on the opposite wall. Samuel could see the stars and surrounding city through the two windows. The face that stared back at Samuel was Samuel's own face grown old. The old man in the chair was Samuel at age 80 or thereabouts. This old man, this vicious noise maker who had driven Samuel to the edge of madness, had Samuel's green eyes and bony elongated figure. It was Samuel's voice that came out of the old man in raspy wisps. But how could this be? What was this old version of Samuel doing here? Samuel wanted to move forward but his body would not let him. Instead, Samuel just stood there in the doorway and stared at his aged figure in the chair for quite a long time. Samuel closed his eyes and imagined himself a witness to this bizarre scene. It simply could not be explained or understood by anyone but himself. Life was speeding up now, his years colliding forward in a steady stampede.

The old Samuel that sat in the chair pointed to the table and the object that was sitting on top of it. It was the knife Samuel had earlier used to attack the wall. Samuel edged closer to the table and grabbed the knife in his right hand, his good hand. Old Samuel bade him to come close. Samuel obeyed. The old man pointed at the knife and grinned, his wrinkles creaking like soiled leather. Samuel began to weep and then plunged the knife into the old man's heart. The knife stuck there perpendicular to his seated frame, the wound not bleeding. Old Samuel laughed a young man's laugh and withdrew the knife from his chest. He shook his head no and pointed at Samuel's emaciated chest. And Samuel knew what had to be done and did it.

Samuel, the knife jammed into the left-hand side of his chest, was supine on the floor, bleeding out next to the old man's chair, when he heard the old man mutter *mavet*, the Hebrew word for death. With a childish grin across his face, the old man fell silent while the great Earth spun beneath his feet. Why had God chosen Samuel? Gabriel was right; we could never know why.

"*HaMa'eivenYavin.*"

The Few Things I Know About My Birthparents

Courtney Varnum

She was Creole. Radiant tanned skin—
a running enthusiast.
Photography and motocross
hobbies she often pursued.

He was older. Grandparents still alive.
Blond hair framed an Aryan face.
A heart murmur. Hay fever. Skydiving
and racecars his listed activities.

Perhaps it was her adrenaline he fell
in love with— the way she excited
his pulse— spontaneous crescendos
nonexistent in his married life.
Or perhaps it was her innocence he craved,
like an early morning piss
then back to bed
until the alarm woke the kids.

I know he had blue eyes like my daughter.
A tiny recessive allele I see every morning
when she asks me for waffles— with extra syrup.

My eyes are the dark syrup of the Creole.
My hair cascading
rich like molasses from a spoon.

Taboo

Darcy Russel

We three jump;
One pale girl and two tanned boys.
the taut black fabric
sending us past the tops of trees,
and into the arms of the sun.
the heat turns us into animals.
Taboos are dropped as easily as
our shirts.
My chest is flat—
I'm too young for breasts;
or hips or waist.
We three are all the same;
with our round puppy bellies
and sweat covered skin.
The sun burns my chest.
A part of my body, that has
rarely been touched by his rays.

With a coiling of muscles
I push off
and soar.

My limbs hang in the air and
my hair whips about my face
as wind pulls me higher and
higher. Carrying my laughter
to the sun.

Then—
"Darcy Danielle Russel! Put your shirt back on this instant!"
The wave of my mom's voice
forces gravity on me again.
dejectedly I slip my hands
through the cotton cuffs
of a too bright orange shirt.

An Old Man's Keep

Rae Steinberg

A Family History

Dharna Macedo

Now, I'm not one to gossip, really, I'm not, but I just have to tell you this story about my family. You never would have imagined anything like it.

***

Thud-ump. Thud-ump. Thud-ump. That was the sound of Grammy limping down the hall. Some people said she had a wooden leg which would explain the loud thumping sound every time she walked up and down the stairs. She never admitted to it. She'd just limp loudly around the house Pop Pop built sixty years ago. He's dead now. Going on ten years, God bless him. She'd stand in the kitchen over the stove cursing about this and that, making her sauerkraut, sausage links, and white potatoes, her excuse for a meal. These were the only two things I could think about at her funeral. I could hear her limping up the stairs to my room with the thud-ump's echoing up after every stair, Grammy in what must have been her only polyester flower dress yelling,

"Macy! Where the helld'ya put the damn car keys? I need to get to the drug store before it closes."

Grammy had two homes. The house Pop Pop built after the war and the drug store. They closed for Grammy's funeral so all of the people who worked there could attend and pay their respects to Ms. Laiten, that's what they called her. Laiten Mayers. My Grammy, or Ma'am respectively when she was yelling. Anyway, Grammy passed a little over a month ago but I can't help but feel like I'm missing something in this big house. I can't bear to get rid of her belongings, just like she couldn't bear to get rid of Pop Pop's "life treasures" when he passed. Ma told me to take care of Grammy, that's why I'm here. When Pop Pop took his journey, Ma was worried that Grammy would fall to pieces about it and she sent me to take care of her and the house. She musn't have realized what a stubborn woman her mama was, because from the second I set foot in that house as a caretaker of sorts, excuse my language, but all hell broke loose. She started recounting tales from years passed with a bitterness like no one has ever witnessed, you know, other than when the Yankees and Southerners talk about the Civil War Grammy really did turn bitter in her final years, God bless her. No one wanted to be too close to her. . I guess she never got over the fact that her family was as dysfunctional as one of those tabloid magazines at the grocery.

***

Pop Pop moved to Carolina after the war. Grammy was with child for the third time with my mama. He used to call my mama Birdy because when she was little she thought she could fly and jumped off the roof of the house. Needless to say, things didn't go well. I saw some old snapshots of her in the cast and thought it was mighty funny when I was younger and wondered if I could fly. Ma never let me go anywhere near the roof, she thought I'd try to reenact her flight. Anyway, Grammy, who Pop Pop referred to lovingly as Baby Face and always with a little pinch in the derriere that made Grammy blush, well she must've been a mighty strong-willed person to handle the whirlwind of a family history that we had.

"Did you know that your mama, Uncle Clyde and I have another brother?"

Aunt Cindy told me one day.

Golly, I must've only been twelve or so.

"Another brother?" I asked.

"Yes, your Pop Pop had a child during the war."

Auntie Cindy must've been a little upset because of past occurrences. You see, she decided to run off with Uncle Rodney and drop out of college and Pop Pop said he was taking her out of his will. He did. She never got over it, woman didn't even attend his funeral to pay her last respects to her pa, God bless him. That never did set right with Grammy. She cried and cried looking around for her kids but one was missing; her own flesh and blood not even there to pay respects and weep with her.

"Your grandfather had a lot to struggle with during those years Kathy," Ma said to me when I asked why I hadn't ever met her other brother, "times were different, these things happened all the time."

"Does daddy have a daughter somewhere that I don't know 'bout mama? Or how 'bout a brother for me?" I asked.

I got slapped in the face then and there. Twelve years old and getting slapped in the face like I had said a cuss word.

"Don't you ever even think that thought ever again."

Must've been a sore spot question for Ma, because shortly after this had happened daddy left us for another woman and their son and daughter. Ma never quite got over that ordeal but daddy kept in touch with me. I got cards and presents on my birthdays and Christmas. His new wife is pretty ordinary though. I still think he coulda done better. Grammy pretended to like her when Daddy would come by to pick me for his weekends when I was little. In secret though, Grammy used to call her, excuse my language again, a little hussy who's got no respect for the family unit, such a disgraceful tart!

***

Pop Pop brung his son around one Thanksgiving a few years before he passed, God bless him. I was just beginning my teenage years; I had my thirteenth-and-a-half birthday a week before. Anyhow, my Uncle's name's Michael and he's half a Chinaman. I guess Pop Pop had a weakness for those foreign ethnic types of women. I guess 'Nam was a pretty tropical place because his son was pretty tan and looked like some kind of person from one of those islands over there. That was the strangest family dinner we had ever had to date. I mean I guess Michael was technically family so we didn't spare him nothing and treated him like family. He had to deal with the family like any other one of us,

"How is it over there in Veetnam now that the war's done over?" Grammy asked all cordial-like.

"Did you see bombs going off!" I asked and Ma slapped me from under the table and Grammy coughed to distract from my "rude and inconsiderately asked question."

How was I supposed to know that there were questions I wasn't allowed to ask? How was I supposed to know at my ripe young age that I wasn't supposed to mention that he was a... bastard child?

"So how come you never been 'round here before? Didn't your Ma want you to meet us? Did ya' bring me any presents Uncle Mikey," I emphasized the word uncle to sound extra sweet.

Grammy and Ma done kicked me from both sides under the table at that point. I looked at them with that "what'd I do," look and Ma told me to go upstairs because I wasn't getting any dessert. I thought that was an uncalled for reaction because I was just curious is all I was. Anyway, I didn't go all the way upstairs, just halfway up so that I could still listen.

"How've you been Michael? I know I wasn't there much when you was growing up. It was a rough time and, well, your mama seems to have done a good job with you," Pop Pop was saying. "Your mama was a good woman and I'm sorry to hear that she passed, I miss her dearly."

I heard Grammy leave the room at this point and then heard her sniffling in the kitchen. Poor woman was strong but I guess hearing that her husband's mistress was a good woman and that she was missed was too much for even Grammy to handle. She didn't go back to the table and I had to run up the stairs quick to the play room so that she didn't see me eavesdropping,

"A lady never eavesdrops on others," she would say anytime she caught me doing it.

Thanksgiving was ruined. I didn't get no pie, Grammy cried so much her face turned swollen, and Pop Pop sat outside on the porch all night smoking cigars and being mighty quiet. Ma told me not to bother either of them and that she and Uncle Clyde would deal with it tomorrow. Auntie Cindy was loving every minute of the Thanksgiving disaster. She went home chuckling to herself about it. Uncle Chinaman left; he had a flight to catch in the morning back to the tropical island of Veetnam. He never did visit his paternal family again. Guess we weren't up to his foreigner standards. I can't say that I blame him though. Pop Pop was never quite the same after that visit. He talked a lot less, ate a lot less, and stopped pinching Grammy in the rear. This is when Grammy's bitterness started to rear its evil little face.

***

Pop Pop passed, God bless him, in the Spring time. His funeral was another family get together, 'cept this time there were no foreigners in attendance. Grammy cried and cried until her face was red and turned swollen again, and Ma and Uncle Clyde had to hold her up so that she wouldn't fall into the casket to be with Pop Pop. I wasn't too young or too old, so I fully understood what a serious moment this was. Well, remember how I said Auntie Cindy didn't attend the funeral? Well, she did attend the after-party. She came bouncing into the house that Pop Pop built after the war in a low-cut, cleavage bearing red dress with her husband, Uncle Rodney, and their clan of children, laughing and making a scene like it was a celebration or something.

"Why's everyone so damn morose? Let's just celebrate the man's life and all his lovers and their children! Mama, his mistress, his bastard, and all the rest of us children we don't know about," she was yelling at the crowd in Grammy's living room.

She must've been drunk, Auntie Cindy must've been, because never in my life have I seen a woman put on such a show while sober. She was carrying on about Pop Pop's will and about this and that, and how he never loved them anyway, and how he was always carrying on with other women the whole time he was alive. Grammy done threw her eldest child out the door with her husband and children in toe. And then we proceeded with our grieving again. Auntie Cindy didn't come

around too much after that. Ma told Grammy to get a restraining order but Uncle Clyde said, "That would be damn near loodicrus to restrain your own goddamn child for christsakes."

Uncle Clyde used the Lord's name in vain daily and Grammy used to say a prayer every time for the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to bless her son's heart for his foul mouth, he didn't mean nothing by it. Grammy didn't get no restraining order, she just looked at all the old family photo's hanging up on the walls around the house mumbling to herself and sometimes crying to herself. Poor woman's heart must've been broken. Her cheatin' life partner had passed, and her daughter was drunken fool who wasn't allowed around the family anymore.

***

Uncle Clyde tried to maintain the house for the years after Pop Pop died, but he done fell off the roof trying to fix some shingling up there and ended up a cripple. Ma and me moved in with him and his wife, Mary, to help take care of his kids. She ran off with the druggist from the pharmacy a few months later leaving her crippled husband and the kids. She sent a few postcards but no one's ever seen her since. Lucky for Uncle Clyde, Ma's good with children and she's been taking care of them for the past couple years. When Grammy got sick she sent me to care for her. I'd have to help her into bed and things like that, but she never did let me help her with her bath. It must've been her hiding her wooden leg. At the funeral I finally got to see it, you know, the leg. It wasn't actually wood or nothing. I guess Grammy was just an old woman with a heavy step although I swear I saw that leg standing by itself in the kitchen one day without her attached to it.

I'm really not one to gossip, but God almighty, I just had to tell you about my kin. I suppose I should just stop talking about our history and take the secrets to my death, so don't you go gossiping to anyone about my family. It's a harsh life we've all lived, Grammy especially. She never got over all the sadness and hurt that had been dealt to her. She lived alone until I got sent to help her, but even then she wasn't too fond of having me or anyone else around. I believe it's time to step away from all that and try to proceed with dignity. Our family had its share of dysfunction, boy did it, but I guess those of us who managed to come out of it somewhat alright in the head are living decent lives. I mean cripple or not, Uncle Clyde is still a good strong man in thought, and Ma is a mighty good woman always helping out when she's needed. I feel bad for poor Grammy, God bless her, her family did kind of get away from itself after Pop Pop's secret done come out. I'm just trying to set myself straight now, it seems like I've got insanity in my genes, at least I know Ma loves me, I'm her only child and always will be. Daddy's been decent too, and Grammy and Pop Pop both loved me, at least for a time when they could. Well they're both peaceful now I suppose, but I'm sure Pop Pop had hell to pay once Grammy and him were reunited up in Heaven. She had to make sure he knew exactly what pain he caused her, God bless them.

Lost and Found

Natalie Stewart

I hadn't seen my mother in over ten years, despite my numerous attempts to find her. She had been living on the streets with a severe addiction to alcohol and crack-cocaine; not even a private investigator could track her down. When I was ten years old, she had a surgery to remove a disk in her back. She was given Oxycodone and several other opiates to alleviate the pain of recovery. She was hooked from that moment. Despite the family's interventions and two failed rehab stints, mom disappeared in 1998; I was twelve years old.

Before the surgery my mother was amazing. She was involved in everything I was a part of and encouraged my interests. Whether it be dance class, softball, or girl scouts, she would be right there cheering me on louder than any other mother. I consistently had the best birthday parties; but one really sticks out in my mind. For my tenth birthday party my mom decided to get two rooms at the nearest Embassy Suites. I had always wanted to have a pool party, but since my birthday was in the middle of December that was never a possibility. The Embassy Suites however, had a heated indoor pool. My friends and I swam all night, ran around the hotel, and played games until a midnight sugar-crash.

I remember coming back up to the room after the high jinks with my friends to open presents. Mom was entertaining a couple of girlfriends she had invited. They weren't any of my friends' mothers or women I had ever seen before. They were drinking and when we came in, they started to scatter away from the bar area. I didn't think much of it at the time, but it's obvious now that drugs were involved because the women never went to sleep that evening.

***

I push the steel square button to open the ICU doors. I walk down the cold, sterile hall past rooms with glass doors large enough to see the patients presumably on death's door. I come to the room that's holding my mother and rather than stop and take a breath as the others are doing, I practically run into the room as if my mother is awake on the other side to give me a hug. I am twenty-two years old now and have just been called by the Broward County Medical Center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. My mother was hit by a Ford F-150 truck on a major highway in the middle of the day. She was high.

She lies there, motionless- a shell of the person I used to know. My mommy, head shaven and covered in stitches and scars. Her body is so tiny, but swollen all at the same time. I take no time to process the extent to which she is injured, I just walk over to her bedside and plop down to her left, and begin to gingerly rub her puffy hand. I lean over and softly whisper in her ear, "Hi mommy, it's me."

Her left eye shoots open and the ice blue pierced through me harder than anything I had ever felt. She's looking at me with one rough eye as I rub her hand. The nurse mutters something about a purely physical muscle reaction and it has nothing to do with me or brain activity. I don't care, they said she hasn't opened her eyes since she came in, but it jerked open when I spoke. I rub her head like she used to do to me when I was sick, as I whisper in her ear, "I love you mommy. I love you. I forgive you for everything. I love you mommy." I retract to my youth as I

pull myself into bed beside her and wrap my arms around the swollen shell. It's the closest I have come to my mother in over ten years.

"You can't be in the bed, your mother has HIV and with all those open sores you could get infected" the nurse calls out.

"I don't care!" I scream.

They pull me off of her as I begin to cry again.

"Get off of me!"

"You have to calm down!"

"You calm down. Get the fuck off me!"

I crumble onto the floor and sob silently pushing away everyone who tries to touch me for what seems like hours, but is actually only five minutes.

My crying session is interrupted by a hospice care employee who informs me the head of neurosurgery wants to speak with me.

I follow the hospice employee to a small waiting room outside of the ICU with one single tiny window in the corner, the only source for light besides a pathetic coral plastic table lamp with no shade. Ten agonizing minutes later, the infamous doctor finally makes his entrance with four interns behind him, explaining this would be a good learning exercise for them. *Really? Really? My mother's reliance on life-support is an exercise for you?* I think to myself, deciding now is one time in my life when I should just keep my mouth shut.

"Right now the only brain function that your mother has is the brain stem. She is paralyzed from the neck down and will never wake up. She has no quality of life. She will live as a vegetable forever."

The bluntness, with which this jerk-off was speaking to us, was the same in which a tech-support guy would instruct you to hook-up your cable box.

"With all due respect why haven't we seen you before? Your mother has been in and out of this hospital many times over the past few years and we have never seen or met any of her family," he says.

I chomp my teeth down on my bottom lip until I can taste blood.

He goes on to explain the various head injuries she has sustained over the years from street-beatings. Living in shelters and on the streets has also infected her with HIV and she tried to self-medicate with illegal drugs because they were cheaper than prescriptions.

"Let us know what you decide. The sooner the better" he says as he walks out of the room with his train of sheeply interns.

I don't tell the doctor that I hired a private investigator a few years ago to track her down. I don't tell him how I wanted to see her so badly could feel her arms around me some nights. I don't tell him how ten years with no contact, endless amounts of failed leads and false hope have led me here. I don't tell him because he could never understand.

"I can't do this," I say out loud to no one.

It's building up its coming its coming. I can't. I can't. I back out of the empty room and run down the emergency flight of stairs. I push open the exit door and fall to my knees in the grass-that fucking grass so green and fresh. The tears that have been held in during our mournful meeting burst forth like a cracked dam. I clinch the grass with my fists on all fours like an animal sobbing so hard I have to remind myself to breathe at intervals. People pass by and occasionally look in my direction as I shout "FUCK YOU!" with my blood-shot eyes. The ones in

scrubs simply keep moving; they know the drill and see this kind of hysteria on a daily basis. I dump my bag upside down grasping for the pack of Parliament Lights I bought at the airport. I hadn't smoked in two years. The first deep toke is the most welcoming sensation. It is the first thing besides pain I've felt in seventy-two hours. Though it doesn't stop them, the tears are coming less profusely now. Goddamnit! Why is this happening? I am twenty-two years old, I should be thinking about graduating college, freaking out about my resume and finding an entry-level shit job. I shouldn't be considering taking my mother off life-support after her ten-year absence. I collapse in the grass in surrender.

***

An hour later I am in the tiny closet the hospital has allotted hospice. No windows, one desk, and two rickety mismatched wooden chairs. I wobble back and forth nervously as my chair is running on three solid legs. The kind white-haired man is gathering the paperwork, and I can't help but wonder how many people have signed a life away in this room, in this very chair. A chill comes over me, and I shudder- I can't think about these things right now. There is business to be taken care of.

"Here you are Ms. Stewart. I have highlighted all the areas that you need to sign. I know this is difficult..."

"Just hand me a pen please."

According to Florida state law, the first-born child is considered the next-of-kin if the person is not married. My father had divorced my mother before she disappeared, because he couldn't deal with her habits financially or mentally any longer. If my mother had changed her last name after the divorce, the hospital says they probably would never have found me. Sharing a last name was all that I had left of my mother. My hand wrapped itself around the pen and my chest tightened. I was about to end someone's life. *Would God punish me? Would I feel guilty forever? Am I doing the right thing?* Though it was clear this was the best choice, my body ached at the finality of it all. I made the first swoop of the last "t" of our name. I flip the page to repeat this motion a billion more times with the same sedateness. When I finish the hospice representative says he will be back shortly, he has to process the paperwork. It has all been reduced to paperwork.

Seven cigarette breaks, four final goodbyes, and two excruciating hours later the staff and I are all piled in the tiny room around my mother's bed. Here we are: an audience at an execution. Two nurses begin moving various tubing and bags. The feeding tube, the urine bag- it all has to go. They move silently for a few minutes until they have taken every piece of plastic off of her body except for the breathing tube and heart monitor.

"OK, now we are going to cut the machine off and remove the tube."

I stand stoic, making no movement, no tears, nothing. I am completely numb. I am about to watch someone die.

Her body jerks up and she starts to foam at the mouth, gasping for air. It is the most violent thing I have ever witnessed. I do not take my eyes off the monitor for twenty solid minutes. Her heart rate slowly goes down a little at a time as her breaths become further apart and slightly quieter each time. Just when I think it's almost over she jerks up again eyes wide open looking right at me. Tears accompanied by red-hot anger bob their heads just below the surface of my skin. *I can't do this- is she alive? Can I take it back? Is it too late? Is this just a purely physical*

reaction? Was the neurosurgeon wrong?

The machine shows the wavy line straighten out- the sound is off, there's no point for it now. The color of skin changes right before me- a pale white with red sores and blue bruises changes to a sallow yellow- as if something inside of her body sucked the color from the surface. It is the most bizarre thing I have ever seen. I can't believe this is happening- she is dying.

The monitor finally flattens the line, giving us the signal that it is over. Michelle Yvette Stewart has passed away.

The nurses promptly cover her body with a thin white blanket and inform me they have to prepare her for the morgue and it is best that I leave now. I thank them as if they have just given me mediocre service at a restaurant and exit.

* * *

A few days later and I am back at home in Charlotte, North Carolina. I'm sitting on the floor of my living room surrounded by various mementoes. There's a baby book that my mother started for me. The brown leather binding is limply holding on to the various photos, cards, awards. The book stops about half way to the end and the rest is just blank pages. These pages were to be filled in after age ten, but our family never made it there. Beside the baby book is a biohazard bag containing everything mom had on her at the time of the wreck. There are a couple of blood-stained crumpled dollar bills, one earring, and a silver ring with the word "DREAM" engraved on the front. In my lap I'm holding a brown paper package that I refuse to open; inside are my mother's ashes. I have a large box with pink roses painted all over it and a bright pink ribbon. I place all of the items I have from my mother into the box, and gingerly put the package of ashes in before closing the box. I tie the ribbon around the box in a messy bow and put the box on the top shelf of my closet. I don't know when I'll take it out again, or what I will do with her ashes. I have no answers, but for the first time in ten years, I know where my mother is if I need her.

Play Pretend

Darcy Russel

I'm not your damsel in distress
Waiting for savior strong.
I'm not the rose with bloodied thorns
Wanting you to hold on.
I'm not a mirror cracked,
Waiting to be mended.
Nor am I the golden apple
The gods have gifted.

You're not the noble knight
Wielding a stained sword.
You're not the hero on a white steed,
Rushing to save the girl.
You're not the Prince,
Hosting the ball.
Nor are you some true love who,
With a kiss, can lift a curse.

You're merely a boy;
I'm merely a girl.
Our steps are not so sure
And our backs are not
So straight.
Our kisses resurrect
No one from the dead,
They're just a meeting of
Lips.

On each others skins,
In the raised white lines
Of too many scars,
We read each other's stories.
We fall into the fairy tales
We have on our flesh,
And for a night,
We allow ourselves
To play pretend.

Poem Two

Megan Okkerse

I can't write this poem because I am fat.
I should be steaming broccoli and juicing kale.
My nutritionist said to eat more protein. I took that as a hall pass
for everything bacon, egg, and cheese.
Now even my leggings don't fit.

I can't write this poem because there are evil spirits
in me and I should be burning sage
and performing an exorcism.
The lady in Starbucks is staring at me and I need to glare at her. Maybe
it's because I'm wearing grey, black, brown, and gold together. Or maybe
it's because I haven't waxed my eyebrows. Or maybe
she can tell I put baby powder in my hair today. I knew I should have run a comb
through it first.

I can't write this poem because I don't know if I am a Christian anymore.
How could I write about an object when someone may
or may not have died for my sins and
I could go to hell if I don't
come to a conclusive statement of faith?

I can't write this poem because he doesn't like me back.
I need to cry and eat chocolate while I stalk his Facebook page
to find out who she is.
"So, it's not that you don't want to date, it's that you don't want to date me."
The words spin in my head like my dad's scratched Cat Stevens record.

It's probably because I am fat.

I Know CPR

Faith Lippard

THE CHARACTERS

MAC
JENNA
ERIN
MOTHER

(Interior of a small, light-yellow kitchenette of a one bed, one bath apartment is adjacent to an off-white living room. The kitchenette is equipped with a square-shaped island with a carton of milk on top and an assortment of boxed Girl Scout cookies. There is a white refrigerator with a heavily-marked calendar as well as amateur modeling photos of Erin, a brunette female college student. To the right of the refrigerator is a counter with a white cordless phone, and a set of yellow cabinets above. There is a window, but it is dark outside, it being in the evening. The living room has a green and brown floral couch, a boxy television, a door to a bathroom, and a door to a bedroom. Mac leans against the island, holding a glass of milk with a cartoon on the side. He is a college student wearing a pink polo and khakis. Jenna is an eleven-year-old girl wearing a Girl Scout uniform that is one size too small. Her hair is braided in pigtails that touch her wide shoulders. She is a tall, bulky girl for her age, only a few inches shorter than Mac. She is eating a Thin Mint cookie. They are standing on opposite sides of the island.)

JENNA (admiringly): You look like a Ken doll. Erin didn't say you looked like a Ken doll.

(Mac nervously moves a section of hair off his forehead and smiles. He takes a long gulp of his milk. It's somewhat sour, but he manages to control his face into a tight grimace before smiling again.)

MAC: I think you're the first to call me that. And, I've only known Erin for a few months. She probably doesn't talk about me much.

JENNA (*emphatically*): Yes, she does! (*She shoves her hand in the box of cookies for another, glancing into the living room.)* Well, she doesn't with me. She doesn't talk to me a lot. I hear her talk about it with her friends on the phone, that it's your first date. She should be home soon.

MAC (*nodding, he makes previous motion with his hair again*): How long are you visiting?

JENNA: Just for a few days. I wasn't allowed to go on the cruise with my parents this time.

MAC: Why not?

JENNA (*shifting her sash crowded with badges*): I was bad last year.

(It is silent between the two of them. A distant thump is heard from the living room, sounding similar to an old heater turning on. Mac, forgetting the sourness of the milk, downs the rest of

the glass, this time, coughing violently. Jenna quickly walks up to him.)

JENNA: I know CPR! Do you need CPR? Can I give you CPR?

(Mac shakes his head, waving her away, but still coughing. She runs around the island to his back and wraps her arms around his waist with her hands held together in front of his stomach.)

JENNA: I know the Heimlich too!

(She begins giving him the Heimlich maneuver. Mac makes pained facial expressions, surprised at how strong Jenna is. The next squeeze accidentally lifts his feet slightly off the tiles. Mac gasps.)

MAC (*strained*): Jenna, Jenna, I'm fine now.

JENNA (*lovingly*): That's good. (*Her grip loosens, but she squeezes him once more before letting go and stepping back to her box of cookies.)* I learned that in Girl Scouts, and how to make slingshots, and medicate puppies, and tie knots. I love tying knots.

MAC (*breathing slowly, one hand on his stomach. His polo is wrinkled.)*: Really? You must have a good troop leader.

JENNA: Yeah, but I'm not allowed to go anymore. I'm a home-schooled Girl Scout now. None of the other girls liked me very much. They say I'm weird. My mom says it's better if I do it at home…for everyone.

MAC (*straightens up, discomfort easing from his face*): I've never heard of a home-schooled Girl Scout. (*Checks his watch.*) Are you sure Erin is okay? My cell died. Actually, can I use your phone?

(*There's a thump, slightly louder than the last, and Jenna clears her throat.*)

JENNA (*shaking her head)*: The batteries aren't charged. But, I promise Erin is very close. Have you seen the new Sears catalogue? She's in the bathing suit section.

MAC (*shuddering, he clutches his side*): Yeah, she showed me in our Chem. class.

JENNA (*seemingly ignorant of his pain*): Was she wearing the red two-piece or the blue one with the polka dots?

(*Mac's body spasms and he holds his head. He squints several times, holding on to the island with both hands.*)

JENNA: I know CPR! Do you need CPR? Can I give you CPR?

(*Mac jerks back from her. He wobbles, grabbing his head.)*

MAC: No, that's okay. Can I use your bathroom?

JENNA (*looking disappointed*): It's right over there. (*She points to the farther of the two doors.*)

(*Mac takes a breath, getting his balance before weaving his way across the living room. As he passes the first door there is another thump, but Mac doesn't hear this, instead opening the bathroom door and closing it behind him. Jenna takes another cookie, taping her foot absentmindedly. She cracks the knuckles of her right hand. The phone rings, and she snatches it.*)

JENNA (*muffled with food*): Hey, mom. Are you having a fun time getting skin cancer in Florida? No, yes, I'm sorry. (*She rolls her eyes*) Yes, mom, I did. Yes! (*She*

sighs before continuing as if reciting something.) Three times a day, half an hour before meals…yes, I know I was bad last time. I'm taking my pills.

(*Jenna turns to the darkened window, fiddling with one of her braids as she appears to be listening to her mother. She plays with one of the handles of the cabinets. In the living room, the bathroom door opens, showing Mac significantly paler with a small sweat stain on his shirt. He staggers into the room, almost falling as he closes the door, but gains composure. He can see Jenna has the phone to her ear and looks puzzled. Another thump comes from the door and his focus narrows on this. He walks slowly to the door and puts his hand on the knob.*

Jenna now notices him and has set the phone back down on the counter. She is smiling.

Mac stumbles, but pulls the door. There appears to be resistance. He pulls harder. The door is cracked and two slim female hands with pink nail polish bound with rope shove through, the fingers clawing at the carpet.)

MAC (*clearly frightened*): Erin? (*Mac dry heaves, trips, and lands on his knees, still appearing dizzy.*)

(*Jenna walks past the island and stands a few feet away from him by the side of the kitchenette. She has a giddy excitement in her features. Erin's hands are still furiously digging into the rug.*)

JENNA: Did you know puppies take their pills with meatballs? I didn't have any meatballs!

MAC (*groggy*): What? (*He collapses on his side, but has enough energy to roll on his back. He tries to sit up, but he can't. Erin's hands are still.*)

(*Jenna crouches down on her knees to crawl next to him. She has a hand on his arm.*)

JENNA: Mac, will you be my friend forever? Mac?

(*Mac's eyes are closed, but he is still breathing. Jenna grins.*)

JENNA (*whispers*): I know CPR. (*She places her hand on the collar of his shirt, lowering her face to his.*) Can I give you CPR?

(*Curtain.*)

Hudson River Scene, Unsigned

Laura Forester

Perhaps it was beautiful once. Now it hides under yellowed
varnish and generations of grime, crackling with age. A fall
scene, I think, by a nameless artist, a dark landscape. I bend
close, watching as the conservator carefully dry-brushes,
then swabs a test emulsion on a corner edge, a shadow
within the frame's imprint. "Yes," he says, "it can be restored."

Mom loved this ugly thing, so I nod permission, hope restored.
But what did she see in it? A gray sky presses on clouds, yellow
specters. The river is still, lifeless. On the far bank, a shadow,
fist-shaped, stamps the hills and widens to a void. Evil must befall
travelers here. Wagon ruts curve through shapeless underbrush,
through hazy heaps of sulfurous trees, then fade around a bend.

For a moment I wonder what dangers lie beyond that bend.
But I brighten as the conservator begins his work, restoring
and cleaning. With a pat of a sponge, a dab of a brush,
a flick of a spatula, an ox-headed beast, breathing yellow
fumes – lunging and reaching with long arms, ready to fall
upon a traveler – becomes a graceful poplar in cool shadows.

Canopies of foliage emerge, in hues of gold and ochre. Shadows
are resting places now, shelters from the midday sun. Beeches bend
in the breeze. Swaths of carnage and dried blood transform into fall
berries, crimson drupes on Solomon's plumes, true colors restored.
Elderberries surround white rocks rising from umber soil. Yellow
spicebushes abound, but I realize much green remains in the brush.

From low behind the trees, the sun's afternoon light brushes
the hills with a soft palette. The void at the end of the long shadow
becomes a grove of deep emerald, the color of life. Once-yellow
clouds, now white wisps, float in cerulean. A tiny sailboat bends
to the wind, trailing a wake of white ripples. Life is restored
to the river, and the woods and hills display the glory of fall.

I draw closer, stunned by what I see. A whispered word of thanks falls
from my lips as the conservator leans back and lays down his brush,
his work complete. I see what Mom once saw. Now restored,
her painting is ugly no more. I no longer see the shadowy
forms of childhood nightmares. Through a leafy veil, beyond the bend,
I glimpse a pleasant plain yet to be explored, gleaming in yellow.

I know one day all things will be restored. And though my years have fallen
like so many gold and yellow leaves, I hear the artist's voice in his brush
strokes: "Come out of the shadows. Do not fear what lies beyond the bend."

Victims of the Oil Spill

Bree Stallings

Dirty
Holly Lopez

You sit cross-legged on the scratchy carpet of Amy Morgan's basement, flipping through *National Geographics* with Amy and Courtney Drake for your sixth grade history assignment. Amy has a husky voice like Peppermint Patty, and a thick curtain of bangs rests on top of her eyelashes, causing her to blink incessantly.

"Have you ever seen a *real* one?" Amy asks.

Lie. Tell her no, as you study the picture of an African tribesman who is holding a long spear, his mess of genitalia on display for the whole world to see. You fidget with the unraveling hem of your blue polo shirt that doesn't have a horse or an alligator on it, because your mother says it's ridiculous to spend a lot of money on a shirt for a kid. The tribesman's skin is so black that it has a bluish sheen to it, like a puddle of motor oil when the sun hits it. Yellow paint is smeared across his cheeks and the palms of his hands are a dazzling white compared to the rest of him. His wiry hair falls to his bare buttocks, and it kind of reminds you of the witch wig you wore last Halloween, the one you put on sometimes just so you can experience long hair down your back. A shriveled penis rests against his left leg and it looks like a dried piece of dog poop, not pink and plump like your father's. Don't stare at it for too long, the other girls might notice.

"That's disgusting," says Courtney. "We're supposed to be finding pictures for our projects, not looking at naked people."

You've been captivated by Courtney Drake since her seventh-birthday party, the one you were invited to only because your mothers are friends. She looks as though she was meant to be behind the wheel of a Malibu Barbie convertible. Her face was constructed with perfect symmetry, with a little ski-jump nose that looks good from both the front and the side. Her eyes are the same blue as the betta fish you got from Kmart, which died after two weeks of trying to kill its own reflection. But it's her glossy blonde hair that hypnotizes you as you sit behind it in history class. On a nice day, Mrs. Kemp will open a window and the fresh scent of Courtney's strawberry shampoo will glide under your nose and taunt you until the bell rings.

After staring at Courtney's long locks, you go home and try to comb out your unruly chestnut hair, which always looks like you just came out of the wind. But the cowlicks are resistant to your efforts and insist on creating further mayhem. You're certain that, if you let it grow longer, the weight of it would calm it down, but your mother won't allow it to grow past your shoulders. You sit in front of the bathroom mirror and dab your mother's foundation on your face to conceal your freckles, which look more like dirty, brown blotches spattered across your face, as if a car had run over a muddy puddle while you happened to be standing on the curb. You practice holding your hand over your mouth when you smile, to conceal the gap between your two front teeth. Not that you smile very often.

You don't want to be Ruth anymore; you want to be a Courtney. Courtneys have mothers that bake them double chocolate cupcakes to bring to school and take them shopping for pretty clothes, not things that could easily be worn by a boy. And their daddies love them the way daddies are supposed to love their daughters. They buy them gifts for no reason, expecting nothing in return. They give them

a playful tickle under the ribs, their hands never straying where they shouldn't. Courtneys have perfect blonde hair and perfect lives, and they spend their free time making friendship bracelets and testing out new lip gloss. And they always feel clean.

"I saw my brother's one time when he came out of the shower," says Amy.

Courtney's head whips around, her massive ponytail sweeping across your freckles as you're snipping the edges from a picture of the Egyptian Pyramids. "Well, you're a dirty girl for looking, Amy. Nice girls wouldn't look at something gross like that," she says.

Courtney's words wound as if she had directed them at you. A sudden shock of hot sweat surfaces on your skin. You want to defend Amy but know you shouldn't because then they both might turn on you and call *you* "dirty." And you can't let anyone suspect anything, because you promised. Courtney's head is still turned toward Amy, and her ponytail is swaying back and forth like the tail of your neighbor's cat that stalks the birdfeeder in your yard. Without hesitation, your left hand grabs a hold of her lush locks, while your right plunges into them with the scissors. The blades produce a tinny crunching sound as they dig deep into the dense mane. By the time Courtney responds to the tug and spins her head around, it's too late. All three of you stare at the bulk of hair that is spread out on the rug like a dead octopus.

"You little snot!" Courtney slaps you across the face with the palm of her hand and then picks up a magazine and proceeds to beat you with it. "I hate you!"

Curl up like a hermit crab that's lost its shell as Amy tries to pull Courtney off of you. The random strands that escaped the scissors fly manically about her face and her eyes have popped forward as if they have been jarred loose by her rage. You wish you hadn't done it, and you want to tell her you're sorry, but you're too afraid to speak.

Mrs. Morgan barrels clumsily down the stairs in flip flops, a sea-green facial mask crusted to her face. Her toenails glisten with a fresh coat of purple polish. "Girls, girls, what is going on here?" she says. She walks on the sides of her feet so as not to get any carpet lint on her wet toes.

Courtney cradles her dismembered tail in both hands as if it were an injured sparrow. She strokes it gently, as if to comfort it, which prompts a complete meltdown. Her knees buckle and she starts to wail. While keeping a safe distance from Courtney, Mrs. Morgan reaches over you to hand her a tissue, as if she's concerned the hysterical girl might ruin her pedicure.

Twenty minutes later, your mother is shoving you into the front seat of her rusty Volvo. "What the hell were you thinking?" She gives you a sharp smack across the ear once she has pulled out of the driveway and is a safe distance from the Morgan's house.

Your ear is ringing and it sounds like one of those television broadcast tests is being performed in your head. This is not the first time your mother has hit you and it won't be the last. Your instinct is to cup your ear with your hand, but that would acknowledge the pain. Don't give her the satisfaction, look out the window and chew your nails, which have already been gnawed down to the nubs.

"Answer me, damn it!" Your mother leans over to pull your chin toward her, but the car swerves, forcing her to abort the mission. "Courtney's mother is never going to speak to me again. You're going to apologize first thing tomorrow, missy,"

she says as she fumbles for the biggest cigarette butt from the crowded ashtray.

Part of you wants to tell her why you did it. How it made you angry when Courtney called Amy "dirty." And that you feel dirty all the time. But you remember your promise and just stare out the window, watching the houses whiz by, imagining the kids that live in them. Some are probably exhaling a reluctant sigh as they set the table for dinner, while others are playing Donkey Kong on the floor of the den, a rug imprint on their bare legs from sitting so long. Maybe some daughters are helping to frost a cake and are dipping their fingers into the bowl of chocolate buttercream while their mothers marvel at the sheer joy of having a child. You wonder if there are any girls sitting on their beds with their legs pulled up to their chins as they wait for their fathers to come home. Maybe their insides gurgle with diarrhea when they hear his car pull into the driveway.

Your father is already home when you arrive. You get out of the car and trail behind your mother, with your head down and feet dragging.

"You know what our lovely daughter did today?" she says to him as soon as she gets inside.

He's stretched out on the plaid recliner and his face is shielded by the newspaper he's holding open. "What?"

"She cut Courtney's hair off."

The newspaper sounds like crunching leaves as he drops it in his lap. You're still hovering in the doorway and the sudden noise stings your eardrums.

"She did what?"

"Sliced it right off with a pair of shears." She mocks a cutting motion with her index and middle fingers.

"Come here, little chicken," he says while looking right at you.

Your feet feel heavy like cement, and you have to force each step toward his chair.

He cups your face in his hand. "Now, why would you do something like that?" he says, calmly.

You stiffen when he touches you and his rough hand feels scratchy on your soft skin. "I don't know," you mumble, shrugging your shoulders.

"You're going to be grounded for a long time, missy," your mother says. "I'm not sure if I should let you visit Grammy again this summer."

This last statement rakes across your heart, and you let out a wounded whimper. Tears stream down your face without warning.

"C'mon, Beth, I don't think you have to go that far." He sits up and wraps his arms around you. "Courtney's hair will grow back." He smiles as his finger pokes the ticklish spot near your tummy.

"You always stick up for her, no matter what she does." She storms to her bedroom and slams the door.

You want to go to your room, but your father is still hugging you.

"Don't worry, little chicken, I'll talk to her." He kisses your forehead and works his way down your cheek. You want to crawl out of your skin and run away.

You can remember exactly when your father first started to touch you. It was two weeks after the start of kindergarten. When he came home from work, you bounded to the door like an energetic puppy, glad to get a glimpse of him in his work clothes because you always thought he looked especially handsome in his navy blue uniform with the silvery badge. You used to brag to your friends that

your daddy looked like Superman because of his muscular build, shiny black hair, and chiseled jaw. He pulled you up in his arms and called you his "little chicken," a nickname you've had since forever, because of your bony legs.

While he was in the living room watching *Hill Street Blues* and eating a Swanson dinner, you were running the water for a bath. It was the first time doing it all by yourself. Your mother was pulling a double shift at the hospital and said you were a big enough girl to give yourself a bath. You dumped so much Mr. Bubble into the water that all of the powder didn't dissolve, some of it leaving a pink dust on the glassy bubbles. The yummy bubblegum smell filled the bathroom and the mirrors were coated in a hazy layer of steam. You didn't turn off the faucet until the pink, soapy water almost spilled over the white porcelain sides. Before easing into the billowy foam, you dipped your big toe in to test the temperature. There was enough Mr. Bubble in the tub to get you grounded for a month, but what fun it was to gather the pink suds around your body like a security blanket. It was the best bath you'd ever had...until you heard the door open, and felt your father's naked body slide behind you.

"Hey, little chicken, mind if I join you," he said.

You did mind because he had interrupted your glorious moment of Mr. Bubble heaven, and it also didn't feel right that he was there.

He took your hand and pushed it deep under the water until you could feel the thick patch of hair under his bellybutton. "That's it," he said. "Move your hand around."

You didn't get out of the tub until he told you to. While he was still naked, he wrapped a towel around you and sat you down on the toilet seat cover.

"You can't ever tell Mommy about this, okay? She wouldn't understand and she wouldn't love you anymore."

You stared at your mother's Aqua Net can on the counter. Looking at it gave you something to focus on while your father was speaking. You wanted to go to your room, put some clothes on, and burrow into that corner of your closet you hide in when your mother is mad at you.

"Mommy will make you leave, little chicken. You don't want that, do you?"

Your gaze fixed on that blue can of hairspray as if your life depended on it. You wished your mother hadn't gone to work. If she had been home, it wouldn't have happened. The shiny blue label became fuzzy as your eyes started to water.

"Look at me, Ruth," he said, as he gently squeezed your shoulders.

You turned your face to him, but you couldn't bring yourself to look at him.

"You have to promise not to tell anybody. It has to be our secret."

Tears ran down your face, plunging to their deaths as they dropped from your chin and splattered onto the bathroom tile. The heavy aroma of bubblegum that was still trapped in the room was making you sick.

"There's no reason to be sad, chicken, Daddy would never hurt you. I just need you to promise to keep our little secret."

You parted your lips as if about to speak, thinking it would buy some time. You didn't understand why he was doing this. It was true, he didn't actually hurt you. He hadn't hit you, you had no bruises. But it didn't feel right. If your mother found out, maybe she really wouldn't love you anymore, like he said. You thought about where you would live if your mother made you leave, and wondered if Grammy would let you stay with her, or if she'd be mad at you, too.

"Come on, Ruth, promise," he said, giving your shoulders a stiff shake.

"I promise," you mumbled, gritting your teeth so hard you thought they would break.

***

Courtney is still in too much of a tizzy to hear your apology, so it is postponed until the weekend. You come home from school, glad to have the house to yourself. Click the television on and go get a pack of peanut butter crackers, the glow-in-the-dark orange ones, from the cabinet over the kitchen sink. Your nail-deficient fingers try to peel the plastic wrap from your snack, and you're about to change the channel because *Oprah* is on, and you'd rather be watching Michael Jackson videos on MTV. But then you hear the woman sitting across from Oprah say, "My uncle started touching me when I was very young." You sit back on the couch with bright orange cracker crumbs falling on your shirt like snowflakes and watch Oprah's big head lean in toward her guest, as if to signify that she is genuinely interested in what she has to say.

"How old were you when it started, Rhonda?" says Oprah.

Rhonda is twisting a white tissue that she has just drawn from a big box of Puff's that Oprah has set beside her. "I can't really remember exactly...maybe five... six," she says as she wrings the tissue like she's choking it. She looks a little older than your mother, but all adults look old to you. Black roots poke out of her frizzy blonde hair, and the loose skin under her eyes is rippled like when a stone is tossed into a calm stream.

Listen intently while Rhonda tells Oprah's viewing audience that her uncle would molest her when she was alone with him. She was confused because it felt wrong but he was also nice and gave her a pair of unicorn earrings. He convinced her that nobody would believe her if she told, so she kept it a secret. As she got older, she thought there was something wrong with her. Otherwise, why her uncle would do that? She started doing drugs at fourteen because she felt damaged and wanted to die, and she ran away from home at fifteen and started having sex with strangers because she thought she was worthless. Now she's got something called AIDS and doesn't know how long she'll live, and she doesn't have much hope because she has no money and has been living in her car.

Pay special attention to the end of the interview when Oprah asks Rhonda what advice she'd give girls out there who are going through this right now.

Rhonda looks into the camera as if she's speaking to you, "Know that it's not your fault, you've done nothing wrong. And tell somebody." Rhonda dabs her eyes with a used tissue that's already streaked with black mascara. "My biggest regret is not telling somebody."

Seriously consider this.

***

It's Saturday, and before you can pry your eyes open, you hear hangers screeching across the metal rod of your closet.

"Put this on, and brush your teeth. We're supposed to be at Courtney's in an hour." Your mother hands you an old green "special occasion" dress that hasn't fit in years.

"But – "

"I don't want to hear it, Ruth." She leans into your face, and her breath smells like cigarettes and coffee.

"It doesn't fit me anymore."

She returns to the closet and yanks out your nicest pair of dungarees and a green top and throws them on the bed.

The drive to Courtney's is quiet, which makes you even more nervous than before you embarked on this dreaded venture. The radio isn't even turned on and your mother always has the radio on. Mrs. Drake opens the door when you arrive. Her blonde hair looks uncombed and deep lines have formed under her eyes since you last saw her. Courtney is sitting on a flowered couch in the living room, with her right leg crossed over her left knee. Her hair has since been shaped into a bob. It's really impossible for Courtney to look bad, and this new 'do is cute on her, although the blunt cut across her thick hair does look kind of like a mushroom.

"What did you come here to say to Courtney?" your mother says, as she pushes her fingers into your back.

"I'm really sorry, Courtney," you say. And you really do mean it because this ordeal has added a whole new level of misery to your life.

Courtney sits back in the sofa with her hands folded, tapping her fingers on her arm. She then rises from her perch and slowly walks toward you like a panther. "I hate you," she says flatly. She jabs a finger into the hollow of your chest. "You did this to me so I'd be butt ugly like you, but I'll *never* be gross and ugly like you, Ruth."

"Courtney!" says Mrs. Drake.

Salty tears pour down your face and into your mouth. "I—I'm sorry, Courtney," you say, your voice trembling.

"Get out of my house," she says. She crosses her arms again and turns her back to you.

"Beth, I'm so sorry, I told her you were coming over and I thought she was okay with it."

"It's okay. Look, she's upset, we'd better go."

Mrs. Drake ushers you both to the door, and you can hear Courtney calling you "butt ugly" as she stomps up the stairs. You wipe your wet face with the sleeve of your shirt, and your legs feel hollow as you walk back to the car. You chew at the dried skin where your fingernails used to be and pray that your mother doesn't whack you in the ear again. She doesn't say a word or show any signs of aggression, so you figure she's saving it up for when you get home so there'll be no witnesses for the beating she has in store for you. But then she pulls into a McDonald's, orders pancakes for each of you, and takes the tray over to a sunny table in the corner. Steam rises from the pancakes like wispy clouds and you marvel at the beauty of the perfect little pat of whipped butter that's melting down the sides.

"I was proud of you today, kiddo," your mother says.

You look up from your breakfast, not sure if she's expecting you to say something.

"I'm not proud of the stunt you pulled," she says, while pointing her plastic fork at you. "But, Courtney was really cruel and you kept your cool."

You stare at your mother, waiting for some indication that you're supposed to speak.

"I'm sure what she said hurt you, but I want you to never forget that you're a beautiful girl. Okay?"

"Okay, Mom."

"Just because I'm upset with you, doesn't mean I don't love you."

She looks pretty in the sunlight. Her hair and eyes are a rich brown like the spots on a giraffe. She's wearing makeup but she doesn't need to, and you imagine her showing you how to apply blush and lipstick in front of the bathroom mirror one day. You have to tell her. A moment like this might not present itself again. You're still afraid that she might hate you, but you don't want to end up like that poor Rhonda on *Oprah* either. Hot knots form in your stomach, and you really have to use the toilet, but you ignore the urge for now. You open your mouth to speak, but then your mother says, "You'd better hurry up and eat before your breakfast gets cold." You sink your fork into the three pancake layers, cut out a triangle and shove it in your mouth, forcing the words back down your throat.

***

You go to school the following Monday. Mrs. Kemp decides to pair the class up to fill out a worksheet and instructs you to partner with Courtney. The metal feet of your chair let out a blood curdling screech as you slide up to her desk, since she's unwilling to budge. She takes out a fresh pack of Hubba Bubba and offers a piece to everyone but you. Her teeth chomp on a big pink wad of bubblegum and the smell makes you ill.

"I told everyone what you did to me," she whispers. Sugary spit droplets spray your face as she speaks.

You pretend to read the worksheet that Mrs. Kemp has placed in front of you.

"Everyone hates you." She blows a giant bubble and leans so close that it tickles the hairs on your cheek.

You look at her and say, "I said I was sorry, Courtney."

Her lips are red and shiny from lip gloss and saliva. The bubblegum cloud closes in on you and the color drains from your face. You can practically feel your father's naked body pressed against you. Dots of sweat sprout on your forehead and upper lip and the roof of your mouth is slick with mucous. The window isn't open far enough for the breeze to counter the sickly sweet smell as it snakes into your brain and down your throat. Put your head down between your knees like your mother taught you.

Mrs. Kemp strolls over and puts a hand on your back. "What's wrong, Ruth?"

"I think I'm gonna puke."

"Gross!" Courtney says. She springs out of her chair and makes a big production of moving away from you.

"Oh dear," says Mrs. Kemp. "Can you make it to the nurse by yourself or do you need a buddy?"

"I can do it," you say, through the fingers you're holding over your mouth.

You make your way down the hall with your arm sliding across the cold concrete wall. Bile erupts in your throat and you cover your mouth again as if it will stop the inevitable. Just as you step into the nurse's office, a sour mass of undigested Cap'n Crunch sprays onto the gray linoleum. Tears tumble out of your eyes as you look at the mound of yellow vomit.

"Oh my goodness!" the nurse says. She has a crinkled forehead as wide as a blackboard and a bun secured with a webby hairnet like the lunch ladies wear. She eases you into a chair by the tall white scale and sets a box of tissues in your lap, the rough, one-ply kind that the school buys in bulk, not the soft, fluffy kind that Oprah doles out.

"It's okay, Ruth, don't cry. The janitor will mop that up, don't you worry." She kneels down and rubs your knee. Her warm, veiny hand reminds you of Grammy's.

By this time, you're crying so hard that your throat starts to convulse, preventing you from speaking.

"It's alright, sweetie. Let's get you over to a bed." She helps you up and guides you to a cot, and then she leaves the room and comes back with a cold washcloth for your forehead. "Is that better?" she says.

"I want to die," spills out of your mouth, as if the words snuck through your lips while you weren't paying attention.

"Surely, you can't feel *that* bad, sweetie" she says, as she very nicely pushes hair out of your face.

Look into her hazel eyes and search for a sign that tells you whether she's trustworthy or not while Rhonda's voice pounds loudly in your head. *Tell someone.* You're tired of feeling dirty all the time and scrubbing your skin raw. You can't imagine feeling worse than you already do and figure that you could end up homeless whether you tell somebody or not. "I was molested," you say very quickly, as if ripping a Band-Aid from your knee.

Her eyes water and she gently rests her hand on yours. The warmth of it feels comforting. "Are you sure…I mean…by whom, dear?"

Your limbs are trembling. Snot trickles out of your nose and you feel another batch of vomit churning your insides. You sit up and start to cry again, sucking in big gulps of air.

"It's okay, Ruth, it's okay." She eases you back down on the bed and unfolds a blanket over you. "Try to stay calm so that you don't get sick again. I'll be right back."

She leaves the room and you don't like the quiet because it allows doubts to gnaw at your conscience. Maybe you shouldn't have told. But you didn't name names, so you could still change your mind.

There's a big poster taped to the wall facing you. A white boat with a bright yellow sail sits on a sea of crystal blue water, surrounded by sugary sand. It reminds you of this past summer when you went to visit Grammy in Cape Cod, the only joy you've experienced since the bathtub incident. Every day, you'd lie in a hammock on the peeling porch of Grammy's beach cottage while the salty breeze caressed your skin. Grammy would bring you a glass of lemonade with sugar on the rim and trickles of condensation racing down the sides. She'd rub your feet and tell you stories about your grandfather, whom you've never met, and your mother when she was your age. Her faded red hair fell like ocean waves around her face, and the wrinkled corners of her sea glass eyes looked like they'd been stamped by the feet of a gull. The sound of the tumbling waves coaxed you into an afternoon nap, and you slept without the fear of your father's hands creeping down your cotton panties. When you woke up, you walked down to the ocean. The wind whipped your hair and you pulled it out of your face with your fingers, but some of the strands kept escaping, determined to reach toward the sky like kite strings. After stripping down to your red one-piece suit, you inched your way into the surf and watched in delight as the tide sucked your sandy feet clean. You doggy-paddled out until you could barely touch bottom, then submerged your head, hoping the water would wash away the filth that lives under your skin.

Twenty minutes later you hear muffled voices coming from the next room, and

then the nurse returns with your father.

"You okay, little chicken?" your father says, as he pats your head. "Let's get you home to bed."

The nurse hands you a barf bag and escorts you to his cruiser. You look at the back of your father's head as he clears off the front seat for you. It looks like he's just gotten a haircut, his neck is cleanly shaved and the ends of his hair are damp. You slide into the car and sit perfectly still. You feel faint and want to roll down a window, but you're afraid to. The car starts to move and your father rolls down his window. You lift your head, hoping the outside air will reach you.

"You broke your promise, Ruth," he says without taking his eyes off the road.

Popcorn kernels are exploding in your gut and you feel the burn of diarrhea return. You want to look out the window but the sight of the houses and trees zooming by makes you feel nauseous again.

"The school called Mommy at work, but couldn't reach her. I'll bet when she gets the message they left for her, she'll run right home." His hand slithers over your thigh and rests between your legs. "But we're not going home."

The static on the police radio reminds you of the ocean. Close your eyes and let the sound wash over you.

My Education

Rae Steinberg

I don't want to learn anymore.

Politicians, patriots, professors,
Developing countries and my mother
Say I have to.
But I don't want to.

If night's first star isn't so
Bright, I state my case to each
New light as they surface like
Freckles on my fair skin under
Summer's unshackling sun.

Maybe the Dippers will
Scoop me up the way a child
Snatches that one-of-a-kind
Clover, the lucky one. Or

Maybe Leo's rage will
Reawaken, his iron jaws
To feast upon the troll
That charges me fifteen
Hours a week for an "A." Or

Maybe Orion will draw
His sword and slaughter
The idiot who says I won't
Succeed without a degree.

Upon the stars, the moons, the planets,
Tree branches, airplanes and everything
Else my skyward eyes perceive:

"Please, don't make me
Learn anymore. "

Paul and Me

Dara Cameron

If we never knew each other,
Are we still considered cousins?

He drowned in Lake Erie before I was born.

I feel no terrible loss when I see his picture.
His brown buzz cut and teal tee are all I know of him.

Morose memories of times we shared –
Of hide and seek or games of mother may I –

There are none.

I remember my father once telling me
"It was probably best he died so young.
He was so innocent, and pure of heart,
That growing up might have killed him anyways."

Every day the future comes closer,
I shrink back a little further,
Too afraid to face it.
Eternally playing hide and seek with my life.

Mother, may I hold your hand?
Mother, may I cry?
Mother, may I wish I were Paul?

I feel like there's no place for me in this world of grown ups.
The adult table is already too full.

If only there was a child's booster seat
That could squeeze comfortably into a spot just for me...

But there are none.

Neat Little Package

Lauren McKinney

You couldn't see the train coming;
Your eyes were sewn tight like some pin-poked doll.
The needle and thread are still clasped in your cold, gray hand.

What I could never understand, was why
You said you didn't like life
Wrapped up as if in some neat little package.

Why not like happy, perfect endings?
They do happen, when you make them.
You didn't want one though, you chose

To throw yourself in front of that hustling
Train. He was a running silver bullet, shooting
Down the barrel of sorry steel. Not everyone goes

Through such tragic losses. Most of us
Die of natural causes, after living our lives
Out until they wear away their neat little packages.

Clouds to the South

Molly Warren

The Mixx

Elizabeth Fritz

Mid-flight
Jeremy McCamic

Part-way through the second course, Martin Wheeler's left index finger inflated. It shot up toward the ceiling as if signaling he had something to add to the conversation. Bly Thompson, the host and hopeful subject of the biography he thought Martin should write, stopped speaking, and everyone turned. Dumbfounded, Martin hummed a little laugh. He shook his head, hoping he looked like he thought better of asking a silly question. The other guests, thinking he was interested, would rush home to boast that they saw the moment of conception for the next Wheeler masterpiece. Martin pulled his left hand into his lap, and the host continued.

"Everybody says my life's just like Forest Gump, but with a, you know, a better, a high IQ."

Martin felt a bead of sweat roll from his armpit. Under the table he milked the throbbing finger like a swollen udder. Bly kept going.

"What was it? *Look Homeward Angel*, right? Tom Wolfe makes a million but ticks off all the real life people he talked about. The whole thing happened just like me. Except, I can piss'em off-pardon the uh. I'm a scoundrel. That's why it's fun. You know I met her on the clay courts at the women's college." Bly motioned to his wife who smiled and used a knuckle to smooth the line under her surgically-taut chin. Martin hated her.

She had one story, and she told it every time. Her purse was snatched in a dim sum restaurant in San Francisco. In her version a con-artist chose her. She ate lunch, and the thief knelt behind her, tying his shoe until he and her purse blended into the background. She would point out that this was clearly not his first time. A brilliant bit of stage business like tying a shoe didn't just occur to people. It took forethought. She preferred being taken by the Artful Dodger to forgetting her surroundings over dumplings. Now every demitasse of espresso or tiny plating for amuse-bouche reminded her of dim sum and the great purse getaway. The singularity of the story led Martin to believe that she had suffered nothing else. Draping a purse over the back of her chair may be the only risk she's ever taken.

As his contempt subsided the pain in his finger came back. He tried to slow his breath and think cold thoughts, Zen monks meditating on a glacier. Carefully, he raised his left hand and gripped the icy bulb of his water glass.

Bly's gaze landed in turn on each of the women at the table. He leaned in and spoke softer. A one-sided smile said *we wouldn't want the wait staff to hear.*

"They were the only ones that had clay courts, so we'd sneak in after curfew to practice. But see, sneaking around breaking curfew, nobody does that

anymore. Can you imagine having to go to the women's college? The club didn't get clay until, I think until the eighties."

Martin focused on the embroidery on Bly's polo. The olive branches seemed to move, to coil and then constrict the whiplash curls of the monogram.

"I went over there and coached the national tennis team. I think it was sixty-nine or something. They won a silver medal. Only medal the Vietnamese ever got was that one for tennis. I was up in the stands and sitting right next to me was Big General and Little General. That's what they called them. You're old enough for that one Martin, He was Minh or Huy. He sat *right* next to me. You can look it up. He loved tennis."

Martin stared at the table setting. His plate kept slipping out of focus. Seeing meant prying his eye uncrossed. In his champagne flute, the tiny bubbles emerged in a single straight line and then spread over the surface. The bubbles gave the illusion that the table and the entire room were sinking. Before he could steady himself, the finger inflated again. He could feel the skin stretching, the endings under his fingernail smoldering. A hornet was trying to escape.

"My father was a pro golfer. Never weighed more than a hundred and eighteen pounds, but nobody could beat him. One guy in Florida could, but they were back and forth. My brother sold the drug company to the Germans. It's our Uncle the School of Pharmacy is named for. He built the thing. His picture's there. I don't know that they kept the name. My Uncle does Angel flights. Have you heard? Sweetie, is it Angel Flights or Angel Wings? Anyway, twice a week he takes sick people up in his plane, and he flies them to whatever hospital or specialist they need. That's something. That should be in there too. Hold up the distinguished family; show how I'm the black sheep, the tennis pro. It's just like Forest Gump but not, I mean I've got it, you know, in the uh," he tapped his head. "I just have a crazy life."

Martin's left hand jumped up again. All the fingers splayed out, and his wrist bent back making the gesture of a startled virgin from a Renaissance painting. He thought of those paintings and frescoes illuminated by the colored beams from arched windows. He tried to bring up the memory of the cold marble but he heard a breaking glass and sunk down into a forest of chair legs and high heels.

When he awoke it took him a moment to register his surroundings as those belonging to a hospital. Strange outlets and compartments clustered together on the closest wall like the kitchen in a 747. A daytime show he had seen before fuzzed on the TV above the door. The guilt of recognizing the trashy show snapped him back.

A young doctor, one week into his first beard, walked in and opened the chart clipped to the foot of the bed.

"Hello, Mr. Wheeler. I hope you're feeling well."The doctor made every

effort to couch his words as those of a friend, a friend that didn't make eye contact. "I stopped in to let you know that this was another transient ischemic attack, a mini stroke, like in," he flipped back a page. "Like the one you had in '03. Do you remember? Now we've got you on aspirin and anticoagulants. The good news is there doesn't seem to be any internal hemorrhaging. Nothing like that. But in *some* cases these attacks tend to precede full blown strokes. I contacted your regular physician, Dr. Jean, and you need to make an appointment with him this week." The doctor closed the chart and stared. The thin beard failed to cover red acne bumps on his cheeks. Martin had the feeling that an impostor, a patient from the mental ward, had stolen doctor's scrubs, and learned the word ischemic, and contacted Martin's regular physician.

"Are you having any aphasia, any trouble making sentences?"

"I'm a novelist." The doctor kept staring. No laugh, Martin thought. Martin had winced on the word novelist. A novelist writes, and Martin felt more like a moocher, a fake, a flagellant.

"That's a good one. You are all set to check out. But in the next few weeks, some little changes might go a long way. I need you to remember: no fats. No fatty meats, no butters or cheeses, no egg yolks. And we've got to get you moving. On top of all your regular walking I want you to add a couple flights of stairs a day. Can you remember? Start with four but try to work up to eight flights up and down, and no fat."

At home, Martin used the staircase opposite his side of the apartment building. The first steps barely hurt. A twinge of pain vibrated in his arches with each footfall. Climbing half a flight taxed his lungs. He could feel his heartbeat in his thighs and the arches of his feet. He left a wet sheen on the pre-War handrail, once black-iron, now burnished by hands into a leathery-brown.

His third grade teacher taught him how to round numbers by imagining a fat, lazy man walking up stairs. As he climbs an alarm sounds and he has to get to a landing. The landings are round numbers, so if the alarm sounds on 19 he walks up to twenty. If he is on 14 he takes the shorter trip back to ten. If he is on 15 he still goes up. It never made sense. Down is easier, but optimism pushes everything, he thought, as his underwear rode up like a bathing suit. He saw himself doing homework at a rehearsal dinner. He was the ring bearer for a protégé of his father's. The new college grad huddled with his groomsmen all bragging about their jobs and doctoral programs. With the boy Martin in the room they couldn't talk about what they wanted, though he remembered them using the word smooch in weird ways. Eventually they asked Martin about his upcoming year. He boasted about the teacher and the impending challenge of cursive. Well worth it, he added, to be able to sign his name like a ballplayer. He blushed at the memory, self-promoting from the beginning-the push is built in. Then he felt pleased he could

blush. Not all of my blood is stuck in these legs, he thought.

He sat on the middle stair and felt the flab in his lower back channeling perspiration under the scratchy tag in the no-longer-elastic waistband. Maybe that push is something we take to when we're young. A dog's bark drifted from a hallway. Martin hated apartment dogs. They get back in their crates even when the owners aren't leaving. It was the saddest thing he could imagine. A dog living in an apartment yet preferring a box seemed tragically perverse. Martin stayed on the middle stair, determined not to be the lazy, fat man from arithmetic nor the apartment dog. He would not move no matter how loud the alarm sounded. The concrete walls of the staircase kept the city out. After the barking stopped, quiet crashed like the tide. The hum of the lighting came to him. Someone was talking on a cell phone behind one of the doors.

"What am I doing here?" He said under his breath.

He instinctively reached for his cell to check the time, but his pocket was empty. He couldn't place it at the hospital either. Bly's holding it ransom, he thought, or someone else has it. His list of contacts someone might choose to find the owner shot through his mind. It had been weeks since holiday calls to his sister's family. His agent's name popped up. Martin clenched, thinking of the pages he owed. He wanted to cry about the work, peel his skin back and let shame ooze out. The thought of weeks and months of solitaire and TV, time wasted, kindled a howl deep in his diaphragm.

His perfect memory, his gift, brought up his first step as a writer. The starting point was the day his fruitless search for a film, a novel, anything that would light a fire under his ass, ended. There was no such story. No ice axe cracked the frozen ocean of his heart. No story gave his life that sure-sighted velocity the modern canon seemed to promise. That day in the library, at the catalogue that had failed him, he vowed to write that kick in the pants. He vowed to no longer be an unsure grenadier and let fly with something. Martin hoped he wasn't hearing his own pulse in his ears. He sat up straight and let his shoulders relax into a king's pose. His face sagged, and he found he'd been pressing his lips together. The muscles of his chin ached. He snorted out a long exhale that squeezed his thoughts down to one: I can write it. Descending footsteps echoed above him in the stairwell. Unable to rise before they approached, he pretended to tie his shoe.

Windsor Knot

Nicole Pietrantonio

She was the type of woman
Who'd laugh with her shoulders,
neck, and high cheekbones—
precise inflection to the bellow,
gape of the mouth,
and even the tender conclusion
of her delicate hand resting on the jesters arm.

Complete hypocrisy,
for the jokes weren't funny
and the brandy, this late in the evening,
was as warm as the jesters libido
for the giggling hyena.

The jester picked his women
as he did his ties. He wanted them
to stand apart from the suits
they were paired with—

bright vibrant colors,
sleek threads, mostly
clip-on's, as he had no idea
how to tie the knot.
He liked his ties cheap, and easy
to remove and replace.

The jester is comical
in this way he fashions women,
I know him too well, as I am his friend
a genuine classy tie, rarely worn
by him, mostly admired.

I accompany him to events
that matter, events he wouldn't dare
wear a clip-on tie to: family wakes
and weddings, annual corporate parties
and church, also annual.

We've known each other since before
he wore ties, just T-shirts and cuffed-ankle jeans,
baseball caps and backpacks.
I've love him since then.

Empty Room, Empty Bottle

Brynn Feeney

Two days of rain that sends the people to hide
In musty hotel rooms with moth-eaten
Pillow cases and bathrooms where water
From the tap runs brown, like back hill streams
After a torrential downpour in the
Middle of summer, when the daytime heat
Carries over into midnight hours,
Floating through screens of open windows.

As sweat seeps between my toes and the flat
Space in the middle of my breasts, I think
About these "friends" around me. With me.
And yet, despite this supposed company,
I am still sitting alone in this
Hotel room, staring at this empty bottle.

Things to Hold On To

Mary Davis

My sister held me by the hand, high
Up above my head. My eyes
pointed at the hundred-oak
floorboards, studying the path we would take
down the hallway toward the sound
of Daddy toppling home.

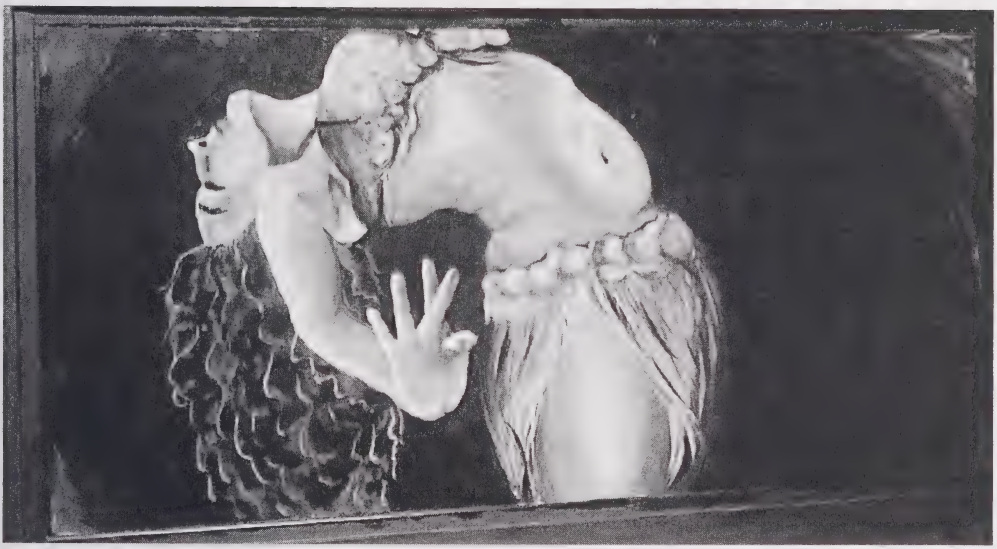
Later, I watch my big sister grip
our small tote, the shiny yellow one
with the big smiley face on it containing our pj's
and tomorrow's school clothes, as Mommy tells us
to get in the car, we are going to stay at grandma's house.

My sister and I stand on the top step of the porch
in the springtime breeze, looking at our families'
two cars, our Mother's purse is slung
over her shoulder. Daddy is right
behind her, talking louder until she is
clutching her purse to her lean body
by the crook of her arm; she hurries
to unlock the light blue car and get inside.

My sister and I squeeze by the overgrown
lilac bush, whose blooms smell too sweet.
We close the heavy doors and lock them
in Dad's face, his blood shot eyes
bulging in the window.

Belly Dancer at Night

Bree Stallings



Three Haiku

Jessie Hunt

Sea horses swimming
One million tiny curled tails
What a mystery!

Prehensile Tail
This is my hand to hold fast
Please be my seaweed

I am a sea horse
My armor protects me but
I am delicate

Jim + the Devil = 3

Faith Lippard

I. Sex

The first time she tried to have sex with him, it was just teasing. They were at Jim's place, because he'd never been to Denise's, only her office, where he signed that contract in blood. And he was aware of being in a part of Hell only because she told him. Otherwise it was a white room with a glass desk and two swivel chairs. Unlike her office, his place in Southern California was crowded with framed album covers of him, Jim McHale, various shots of him in concert, playing guitar. And there was the leather furniture, her decorating. Her favorite piece was a tan armchair, the one she pushed him into by his shoulders after his twelfth visit to the Grammys and he had a little champagne buzz. She still looked eighteen, had looked eighteen for eleven years, but he was used to the cradle-robbing jokes from the press. Her long, dark brown hair was in loose waves for the red carpet, eyelids purple and sparkled with makeup, body wrapped in a white dress, her favorite color. She kissed him opened-lipped on the cheek, and even slightly drunk he tried to push her away. This wasn't on the contract, and it had kind of been a line for him that he didn't want to cross. He thought having lines, boundaries, might be a good thing when he sold his soul to the Devil. But, she was strong, her collarbone like a blade against his hand. Her mouth was on his neck, tongue on his skin, hair draping a little on his face and her shampoo smelled just like the pot roast his mom used to make when he was sick. He kissed her back.

She pulled away, smiling. She licked her disfigured finger to trace the scar on the tip of his tongue. She unzipped her dress. There was more white, synthetic lace, and she straddled him, her hip bones digging his belt in to him, riding him like a coin-operated motorcycle. The kiddie toy image and the light glitter on her face made it hard for him to keep in mind that she was older than him. And it wasn't helping the feeling of a phantom hand clenching whatever those organs were called inside his gut or the unbearable swollen, rigidness of the only part of his body he could remember. He tried to touch her, but she batted him away, pinning his wrists down on the armrests with a grin. Then she stood up, zipped her dress up and walked up to the front door, turning around to congratulate him on that twentieth Grammy.

The second time was later that year on his twenty-eighth birthday, and made the first seem like an unfinished song. From the moment he answered the door to see the sky darkening with clouds and her walking in, no car in the driveway, topless, he knew this was going to be different. And it was. The only thing similar was that she was doing all the singing. Or she was really screeching

as she slammed, mounted, grinded him into the surfaces of the three floors of his place, against the kitchen tiles, the bathroom counter, the dryer. Each thrust was searing pain. It was a near-death experience that left him with three cracked ribs, two dislocated shoulders, a black eye, 30, 000 dollars worth of property damage, bleeding gums, and a thick, frothy, green piss that held up for a burning week and a half. He thought she fractured his skull, but the scan came back clear, the x-ray technician with the black nail polish giving him a one-cornered smile as she eyed the bite marks on his chest.

The third time doesn't happen for another six months and its borderline rape. It's six in the morning, the day after a full West Coast tour, and he jerks up in bed when he feels a weight on his lap. Denise, of course, because he can't even get it up anymore and even the groupies are staying away, spreading the word, blogging about Jim McHale's sexual issues.

She's naked. Her inner thighs are boiling hot, and he's up and ready for the first time in six months. But he isn't looking for death any time soon. He struggles against the mattress, trying to get himself out from underneath her. She giggles, using her hips to move side to side with a sheet between them. His movement is only making it worse, so he decides to play dead, go numb, but that's useless once she tears the sheet down and sets herself back down so gently he doesn't stop her. She takes one of his hands and puts it on her waist before he's stroking her all over, making her close her eyes and rock a little harder and he says "oh, God." She slaps him across the face, leaving it there with the sting, and in the back of his head he's kind of connecting this to how he might react if a girlfriend moaned his ex-roommate's name who kicked him out after he tried to make a few suggestions on their living arrangements. He's not thinking anything when her hand isn't over his mouth but gripping his hair and the moment that's taken three takes to get finally comes, and it's so strong, lasting longer than he can stay awake. When he opens his eyes again to her fully clothed, lying on her side over the covers, chewing on a live lizard, she says it's Friday. He's been out for six days.

II. Attraction without Sex

The first time he found her attractive was the first time they met. He was seventeen, wearing a thirty dollar plaid shirt and machine-faded blue jeans, shopping for his third guitar with his dad's credit card. The warehouse-style fluorescent lighting of Tim's Guitar World was stinging his eyes almost as much as that stupid sun outside, because Seattle decided to have good weather that day. His bassist had suggested he get a new guitar after The Flannel Guys' bomb of a performance at Kelly's house party the night before. That was after his four margarita-flavored B & J wine coolers and puking green lime liquid on her living room couch. The sickening feeling was still sticking to his stomach as he passed

rows and rows of guitars just like the feeling, the knowledge, that he didn't need a new guitar, but talent. None of the instruments, electric or acoustic, were going to make his horrible playing any better, and knowing what the other guys in The Flannel Guys didn't talk about was more nauseating than accidentally walking groin first into the neck of a Charvel.

Why the damn thing was on a stand in the middle of an aisle, he didn't know. But the rusted red color, purposefully worn looking, seemed like the right vibe for The Flannel Guys. He picked it up, slinging the strap over his shoulder, and tried a C chord with the pick he always kept in his pocket. Even without an amp it sounded sharp, clean, right. His fingers started to move on their own, creating a song on the spot. It sounded good. It didn't sound like him. He scanned the store. Was this a joke? The place was nearly empty. No one was taking any notice, no one except the girl staring at him, leaning against a brown Les Paul, wearing a white hoodie and a dark denim skirt with her tan legs crossed at her ankles. She looked like a senior, probably a year older than him, but he'd never seen her at school before. "You're really good," she said, parting her pink lipstick mouth with a lustful sheen to her eyes. Jim was sold, already sold, and his forehead felt sweaty when she gave him her number. He bought the guitar. But once he was back in his bedroom, he couldn't reproduce the song. He could barely wrap his fingers around a G chord. And that chick ready to pounce on him against the cheap, tan carpeting had given him a fake number. There wasn't an area code and the first three digits were 666.

The second time was in a hotel room in Tennessee near the middle of his first string of concerts during what would have been his freshman year of college. She was there to help him pack his stuff in a hurry because she wanted to get out of the South as soon as possible. Something about having a church on every street corner made her feel uncomfortable. She swore people could smell her out down there, smell the Devil out of her, and their use of the word Jesus was making her physically sick. Even checking out was painful. The woman in front of them in line spouted off a sob story sermon about her losing her purse, and after her third mention of the J-word, Denise's nose started dripping blood as she clamped her ears shut, softly muttering some sort of Latin. The bleeding didn't stop until they were packing side by side by, throwing things in his suitcase. In her rush she reached inside the drawer of his nightstand only to jerk her hand out, shrieking in pain. The skin of her index finger was puckered, whelped, like a first degree burn. He swore she was crying a little. There was a pocket-sized Bible in the drawer and he slammed it shut. She looked at him with puzzled admiration, vulnerable, and she was so damn hot. Vulnerable, hot, and even a little human.

The third time is only momentary. She's stroking his hair off his forehead, breath still smelling like lizard guts, looking as motherly as an eighteen year old

can. Her chest is nestled into his arm, both of them in his bed, and he's asking her if he missed anything important in those six days he spent in a sex-induced coma. She shakes her head into the crook of his neck, tells him he needs to take it easy, take a little break from touring so much. He likes this idea. And something about being so normal for even a few minutes, he decides to ask her how he compared to the others she's been with. She shrugs. Playing with his hair, she says it's been a long time since there's been somebody else. Then, right then, with her face close to his, saying she was only with him, he feels a new surge of attraction. But the word "body" sticks out to him, and he asks her what sex is like in Hell, where he isn't sure if there are bodies. She chuckles, telling him there isn't much sex in Hell. Only a select few of the damned are allowed and the demons prefer humans. He wants to know why they prefer humans. She chuckles again. "Jim, it's the only way to reproduce," she whispers before taking his earlobe between her teeth.

III. Violence without Sex

The first time she drew blood was for the signing of his soul. The Flannel Guys had kicked him out of the band and what's-her-face had dumped him the afternoon before senior prom. Before she was able to kick him out of her sterile Seattle suburban home, he stole a fifth of bourbon from her grandfather's damn cherry wood liquor cabinet he'd heard grandfather what's-her-face rave about between his racial slurs. He saved it for the night of prom, taking shots from one of the moist, tiny white cups his mom kept in the three guest bathrooms. With his eyelids numb and his throat slick and rubbery he dialed the number Denise had given him almost a year ago. He got her voicemail, some snarky-ass recording saying "You've reached Denise, Satan, the Devil, Lucifer, I'm not really picky. I'm probably out doing something, like possessing someone or organizing a plague or getting a tan, so leave a message and I might get back to you." He laughed before yelling into the receiver that if she was the Devil she should make a better voicemail and then maybe help him play like he had in Tim's Guitar World. Once he hit the end button he felt cold. He decided to take a bath, sobering unnaturally fast, and when he lowered himself in the Whirlpool Jacuzzi he felt alert even with his eyes closed.

With his eyes open he was in a sharply white room, blank besides a glass desk, two swivel chairs and Denise in a cream colored bikini perched on the lip of the tub with her feet on his thigh. He was naked, still sitting in warm water. The first thing he thought to ask was why she was wearing a bathing suit. She told him she liked to accommodate her customers as a scroll appeared in her hand. He didn't understand, or maybe he didn't want to understand because the stomach-turning feeling of not being drunk at all was horrifying. It meant all of it was real. And he was even more depressed, which made it easy for Denise to convince him,

taunt him with his flashy future. He waved the promise of glitz aside and made sure that she could promise talent, the ability to play for real, which was the only thing he really wanted. Then he was ready, bracing himself with his eyes shut and his chest out. He wasn't sure where his soul was exactly but he kind of imagined this whole thing to play out like some sort of tribal-Indiana Jones scenario. Denise laughed. She grabbed his tongue, cut it down the center with one of her fingernails, and slid a pen in the blood before handing it over so he could sign. And when he did sign, he was back in his bedroom with his stitches in his tongue and a yellow post-it note stuck to the fly of his jeans with a smiley face drawn in his own blood.

The second time was Denise, with the hair brush, in the dressing room. He was on his first European tour and she was playing with his hair while the opening act was on. She acted like it was a game, combing his thick hair she was obsessed with, pulling at the roots so hard his scalp bled. She leaned closer, licked the spot and swallowed. She said he had good blood. It was good, strong blood.

The third time he doesn't bleed because it isn't necessary. She's gnawing softly on his earlobe while he tries to take in what she's just told him. So she says it again, that demons can only reproduce with humans. And when his features freeze in panic of what may be growing inside of her, she stares at him with their noses touching and calls him daddy. "Daddy needs his strength. Daddy can't be out touring all the time. Daddy needs to take care of his son." He's not breathing, he wants to, but her mouth is so close, almost taking in the air before it can even pass his teeth. She kisses him, deep, and his eye sockets feel tight. Her hands are around his throat, digging in, and the last thing he remembers before the heat is a crunching noise loud in the inside of his head.

Once the heat is there, he's back in the white office. Except this time there's a pale painted crib with a mobile of what looks like kitten skulls. He's sitting in a hard-backed rocking chair and that's when he notices the thing in his arms. It has his hair, but Denise's coloring and almost all of her facial features. It even has her long nails scrapping down his bare arms as it gurgles a slobbery giggle. There's a newspaper at his shoes. The headline says he died of a drug overdose. When he looks up from the paper, he sees the office is bigger, longer, and there's a row of matching cribs with guys sitting in rocking chairs. There's at least a dozen, each with a kid in their lap, the closer ones turning their faces from him as if ashamed. But he recognizes the guy one chair down who has kind of long brown hair, black leather pants, a thick, crazy beard and used to have a thing for lizards. And he thought he was the only one. He wasn't even the only Jim.

The Farm Lane

Molly Warren

Four

Jen Windland

I have a list
of things to do
before I die.

Graduate early,
publish a book,
road trip the states.

Meet a cowboy,
take a v-card,
make a million.

Remodel homes,
get married young,
tattoo my flesh.

Have one-night stands,
build some muscle,
be all-honest.

Own a business,
smoke cigarettes,
(maybe just one).

Visit Paris,
start a few fights,
learn the guitar.

Total a car,
be more faithful,
dance all night long.

Out of these things
I've accomplished
exactly four.

Sixteen to go.

Settling

Mary Davis

Lying together in the dark
where never-ending circles bind
our fingers and our lives.
I listen to freezing water
course through the ice maker,
dreaming of the warmth
of tropical falls lost in dense foliage.

Cold toes and pointy nails scratch
my ankles under the smother
of blankets; I hear the whir
of the heater chasing
the chill from the room.

His long arms tighten around me;
The house's wooden frame
pops, echoing through the silent
gulf between us.

The house is settling.
Why can't I?

Memento of a Warrior

Katrina Schweitzer

The corners were bent
This way,
And that way.
The bottom left completely ripped
Off—the tear creeping towards the middle.

Sun reflecting off the Aspens,
Leaves glittering in the wind.
The creek gently moving
Over water smoothed stones,
Perfect for skipping.

I, his backpack
My legs wrapped around his waist
Like loose leather straps.
My feet free of shoes from
Dipping my toes in the cool water.
My arms around his neck,
Hanging on like a teetering toddler.

He holds it folded close to his breast,
Beneath his camo-colored armor.
That last moment.
That final midsummer hike.
That calm before the storm.

The missing left corner,
With the gold block letter date,
Resting on my oak nightstand
In a smudged glass frame,
Sometimes cuddled like a teddy bear on the
Loneliest
Of nights.

Absolutes

Helen Hull

"Absolutely,"
she breathed,
declared.

and I wondered
if her
absolutes

absolved me.

Sandcastle

Mary Davis

The way the separate grains bind
to build your dream from blinding sand.
Tourists topple down the unspoiled house,
scoop the specks to join again.
Packing the perfect walls with your palms,
with water teeming in red algae, like sunburned bobbling bathers.

Emerald coast sunlight glared off the sand
making squint maps on delicate faces.
Green waves licked snowy dunes, wrapped
with kelp garlands, like summer Christmas, the barnacle
covered hope it brought my family home.

Shore your castle walls with
plastic shovels and ocean-packed grains.
Raise a starfish flag on Neptune's trident
and peer through periwinkle windows at
Your family inside. Gathered 'round the table the feast is poured out
from the pot filled with shrimp and crab, as pink as
Your babes.

Know crumbling castle walls are easily mended as
tide washes against the sagging foundation.
Know giants stroll by and kick down the palace only
to see it rise again, its walls intact, shining
Like a Phoenix wing.

Leather-Heart

Justin Lafreniere

Under the crooked awning of the station, waiting for the green No. 51 train, Drake Dalton sat, reading the late edition of the newspaper. Well, not really reading it, but more coiling over the black of the headlines, except for the one smeared by a drop of rain, the one that leaked black ink on his finger. It was not, quite honestly, something Drake would normally do, but under the planked roof, he felt like it was the responsible act, an obligation. When was the last time he even read a newspaper, or held one in his hand, feeling its raspy grit?

Far away, in the darkness, there was the susurration of the train shackling against the rails, like a great beast trying to gallop off a chain leash. It would be here in just a minute. Folding up the newspaper, Drake walked just under the edge of the planked roof, letting the runoff drip rhythmically on to his right shoulder; he kept his left dry. He let the newspaper soak up water, let the print run on to his hands so that he could feel the words grow slimy, invisible. The light of the train began to illuminate the station.

"You should stay out of the rain. You might catch cold." An older woman approached, slowly, the sharp point of her boots clicking on the wood. She had hair that, once, may have been yellow like the glow of a headlamp, but any lightness had begun to burn out with age. "We can't afford to have you getting sick."

Drake stepped back from the rain. "You must be Minerva."

"Yes."

Drake had never met this woman before. He did not like her. He did not like the way she came close, stopping just inches from him, and took the newspaper from his hand, did not like the way she walked over to a wooden wastebasket and tossed it into the opening.

"I may've been reading that."

***

That night, you began, as always, by climbing down the crossed wood of the white terrace; your foot slipped off one of the middle planks, leaving you dangling against the strength of your arms, considering whether you could drop safely to the grassless lawn below. It was a little far yet. Regaining a hold, you descended the rest of the way, until you can set your feet on the ground with a little lunging backstep. The dirt embraced the gaps between your toes. If she knew you were out, your mother, not bothering to change out of her vast off-yellow bathrobe, would probably drag you, by your red ponytail, back into the house, hit you across the knuckles with her ratty hairbrush, and send you to your room for a week.

The sprint across the yard was always one of the trickiest parts of the escape. Nothing shaded you, the escaping silhouette, from an errant glance out the window. The ground seemed to let out breaths in puffs of topsoil with each footfall until you lunged down into the ditch, out of sight. A quick scamper over the road

and through the bramble hedge put you next to the drainpipes that ran out from the city; you had to jump over them. More than once, your running away had been discovered by the murky liquid clinging to the sock heels after a too-short jump and you'd been punished.

After crossing over part of the burned-out meadow, you came to the ravine; the whirling of the great machines, the one that looked like a huge stack of different colored boxes which powered the city and the one that kept the airship dock afloat, miles above the ground, sounded like the grating of a whisk in a metal bowl.

***

"What do you want from me?"

"The same thing we all want from you, Drake: obedience. Unconditional obedience." Minerva reached out and touched the drooping right sleeve of his coat. He jerked back away from her. She had fingers like snakes, long and twisting; they were fingers made by some sick god for suffocating people, for squeezing all the life out of a throat. "So, what you're going to do, is not get on that train. You're going to come back with me, and follow my every word. Do you understand?"

Drake shielded his ears from the whimpering shriek of the brakes; one of the boxcar doors opened. Gunfire erupted from the opening and Drake dropped to the ground, covering his head with his left arm.

"Drake, get in the car." It was an androgynous voice, and bodiless, coming from somewhere behind him or perhaps from between his ears. He got up, sprinted for the door, and plunged into the carriage. A man with a hooked nose dropped his gun and slammed the door shut and the train rumbled off. Looking around, Drake found the car to be totally empty, except for the man who had shot at Minerva.

"Well. That was exciting. Come with me." The hook-nosed man adjusted the gold tassels of his bellhop suit and opened the rear doors, walking across the coupling until they reached a lounge car with plush yellow seats and private rooms lit by miniature chandeliers. All the compartments were empty and an abandoned snack cart sat filled with silver dishes in the middle of the aisle. The attendant opened one of the glass doors and Drake tumbled inside, into the thick cushions. He rubbed his arm, concentrating on the harshness of the gravel that comprised the arm's skin, the texture it left on the fleshy fingers of his right hand. The window of this compartment had been left open, and the train, which had begun to roll onwards once more, grabbed an icy wind and used it to fill the tiny room; the cold moved in through the small gaps in the silt hide, up through his shoulder, and he felt his heart, one-third leather, quiver.

***

Under the crooked awning of the station, waiting for the green No. 51 train, Drake Dalton sat, watching the late edition of the newspaper, spread out, blowing across the tracks in the wind. He paced, sat, paced. He waited until sunrise, and, hearing

or seeing no signs of the train, he walked back towards the City Center.

***

"Excuse me for asking, but where does this train go?" Drake asked.

"I do not know, sir. Wherever you desire, I suppose."

***

It took a day and a half to walk to the city. At its limits, a fence met you with red and white signs giving explicit instructions that no one was allowed entry without proper papers. But, after you walked the length of it a while, you found a hole, where someone had cut it just wide enough for you to squeeze through.

You could see the halogen lights of the buildings up ahead. They were terrifying, all the same hues of the flowers and trees from home, but plastered into the grey stone of buildings, tall buildings, ones that could block out the stars and cause birds to lose their way in the massive labyrinth. Crossing over some open field, with grass, something you hadn't seen since the barn you used to live in had burned down and you'd been forced to move into that little two floor shack. The green blades rub against your ankle, poke through the sparse thread of your socks, tickling your feet as you walk across; when you step up on to a metal ledge and then drop down a foot or two to an asphalt street, something on the rough ground feels like it is missing. Crossing over, passing between busy-walking people in nice suits and merchants wandering about the front of their shops, you begin to wander, trying to remember these places, so that you can find your way back to the hole in the fence later. You don't plan on being here long, just long enough to find something valuable enough to steal, or some hint to where your father has got off to. He has not been around since you lived on the farm.

You began heading towards a sign that read, "City Center." No traffic was on the streets except a few massive vehicles, which looked like the big propane tanks on wheels. Some people waited for them under little metal tents with blue glass coverings to block the occasional breeze. You sit on the bench, looking at a man wearing a full jacket that went down to his knees. It was brown like the dust in front of home. You looked at him very closely; something about his body seemed familiar, something seen in the moments of a morning dream. The air began to feel hot around you and you stared fixedly at the coat, the uneven shape. He looked down at you; his irises were pink, familiar, frightening.

***

While the countryside passed by, cornfields looking like the walls to a gigantic and unending maze, Drake examined his arm, using a mirror the nameless attendant had fetched for him. Bits of gravel had fallen off his arm in his sleep, rocky crumbs that clung to his trousers. He looked at the monster, a monster created out of the broken bits of a worse fiend. His left arm was made of stone, except for bits of human bone and tendon grafted to bits of steel and a diamond that had been somehow coaxed into a long, thin core, helping connect it to his body.

Leather, with an inner-lining from the propatagium of a goose, comprised the outside wall of one-third of his heart, with a little rhythmic steam valve pumping to replace the missing ventricle.

His left leg was just as much a medley of unnatural elements as the rest of him; his knee had been reconstructed with parts from an oil lamp, bits of his shin was made of birch, and, to keep what was left of human muscle warm, the skinned body of a fox wrapped with the white flash of the tail at his ankle, all the way up to his knee. Sometimes lying in the alley that was his home, waiting for the sun to come up, he wondered if he was more man or more machine? He figured there wasn't much distinction; he figured, if he was to live long enough, he would become used to the mosaic of human and animal and earth that he was made of. Drake rose and walked out of the compartment and was thrown to the floor of the aisle when the train heaved into an unruly stop.

***

Drake looked down at the little girl watching him. Her red ponytail flicked when she hopped off the bench and walked in front of him. She was twelve or so, maybe even fourteen, and her clothes had the rusticity of a wastelander about her. He tried to look away from her, but she kept moving to watch his eyes.

"You have pink eyes."

"And you have red hair. What of it?" Drake responded. He got up and walked away. The girl followed him.

"I've only seen one other man with pink eyes before."

Drake did not turn back towards her. He did not know of anyone else with pink eyes, but he did not know this girl. Instead, he quickened his walk. Looking straight ahead, he only listened to the sound of his wingtips on the sidewalk, the clacking sound. But the little girl ran up and got in front of him. Drake brushed the girl away with a stern hand. At an alley up ahead, he turned, walking between the trashcans and dumpsters and litter. At the first door he came to, he entered, weaving through a small crowd of people in some gaudy coffee shop with striped blue walls and a yellow ceiling. Drake went into the men's bathroom and positioned himself behind the door. After counting to a hundred, he walked back out of the restroom; the girl was gone.

A matronly voice asked, "Why are you not at the train station?"

Drake looked around for the sound, but did not see to whom the voice belonged, nor anyone who looked like they could have had such a tone. "What? I waited for the whole night. Your train never showed."

"And the little girl?"

"I don't know. She recognized my eyes. Am I the only person in the city with pink eyes?" He'd headed back into the alley and slammed his arm into the wall, shattering the brick.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I don't know. Why do you care?"

"Go back to the station tomorrow night. I have something for you to do."

"Why should I?"

"Oh, Drake. Hush, hush. Just trust me. Not that you have an alternative. Tonight, go to your alley. A man will come by sometime after midnight. I'll give you instructions later."

Drake shook his head, trying to get the other voice out of his head. He'd been hearing it for as long back as he could remember, which was just about fifteen years. Before that, if there was a "before that," was blank, burned off like dreams by the morning sun.

***

"Apparently, Mr. Dalton, we've arrived," said the attendant, opening the door to the compartment and stepping out on to the platform.

"Where?"

"You should tell me."

Drake exited and looked around him. A large cornfield confronted him, the stalks bending back into the wind. They were like him, deferring to something invisible, something they could hear, maybe sometimes feel, but never see. Some pheasants, hopping dumbly between the rows, stopped to watch him. Far and away, a yellow zeppelin stirred against its tethering; with each gust of wind, it looked as if it might either take off for oblivion or crash unceremoniously into the adjacent barn.

"Drake! I'm glad you could make it." Calvin Rhodes walked out from a small path in the cornfield. "I wasn't entirely sure you'd know how to get home. I'm glad you led the train to the right place."

This, though he was not sure how he knew, was not the first time Calvin and Drake had ever met. Plucking a pebble from his left palm, he placed it into his shoulder. Dr. Calvin had shown him how to do that; it was one of the many disinteresting assortment of facts Drake seemed to know about Calvin, like that he was insistent about walking through doors left-foot first.

"Does it feel nice to be home?" Calvin asked.

"Home? I was built. In a—"

"In a barn. I know. It's over there about a half-mile."

***

You walked around the city for hours. For all your intent on getting here, you now realized that you'd never come up with much of a plan. Finding the man with the pink eyes was a lucky coincidence, but you did not know how you knew him. When your legs became too tired to go any further, you found a bench in a grassy enclosure and sprawled across it, feeling the sun through the shade. If you had done this at home, in that dirt yard, the heat would blister your arms.

That night, you wandered back, trying to retrace your steps to the hole

in the link fence. You had not found anything about the barn you used to live in, or anything about what had happened to your father, or anything of any use to anyone, really. Not that you really knew where to look at all. You didn't actually know where you were. The building you had picked as a landmark to find the way back to the gate looked identical to others every few blocks and the signs for the City Center had changed to signs for a park, a dock, places you had never heard of before. A group of well-dressed people were milling about on the street in front of a building with high windows and globe lighting. The faintest music could be heard from the place, something stringy and thin. You did not want to interrupt their nice evening by stumbling by in your dirty socks and beaten clothes, so you walked down the alley; almost near the end, barely lit by the reflection of the taller building lights, was a man with an uneven jacket. You recognized him immediately. It was the man with pink eyes.

You follow him towards the alley. His rocky hand scoured along the wall, sparks shooting from the brick. The little lines of light, like ribbons for a dark-haired doll distract you. A trashcan rattles against your thigh. He looks behind him, at you. His eyes are the color of the cherry blossoms, like the ones that had grown in front of the barn before the move, before it had been taken away. Before this thought can pass from your memory, the man turns back and begins to walk, a lumbering stagger at first, then faster.

"Wait," you said. He stopped, not as if he wanted to, but as if there was some impassable chasm between him and the other end of the alley. "Who are you?" He did not answer. "What is your name?"

"Drake Dalton." The voice that came out sounded subhuman, animalistic. It was something pained. "Why are you following me?"

"I'm not. Who are you?"

"I don't know." He turned and began to walk away.

"Don't go."

He stopped again. "Why are you holding me here? Do you know her?"

"Do I know who?"

"Follow me."

You did. His walk was a shuffling march, something slow enough for you to keep up. He pushed through a metal gate, the left arm concealed under his bulky jacket tossing it off its hinges. He walked down the metal planks, and took off his jacket. His left side looked disfigured and scaled. Setting the jacket under him, he sat on the edge of the docks, facing the ocean, watching the green waves lap against themselves.

***

Calvin led Drake through the cornfield, shoving the stalks out of the way. "So, what do you remember?"

"Nothing. Well. I remember who you are, but only your name."

"Well, that's better than nothing. You're a type of creature: a golem, specifically. You were built by Minerva, who you met earlier, and me. I wanted to create life in inorganic materials, to study the possibility of a soul, or some existence that transcended human function. I never did solve that question. Minerva, I came to realize too late, wanted a weapon, one that could think and act, and kill without her being there."

"A weapon to do what?"

"Kill wastelanders. She hates them. I didn't realize how strongly at first, but now I see she wants to kill all of them. All of them."

"And how does she know I'll comply?"

"You're her golem. Well, our golem, but hers first. When you were, uh," Dr. Calvin paused to look at a stalk. "Turned on, or born, as it were, you saw her first. That gave her a stronger natural bond to you. It's natural law that you cannot disobey her."

***

Drake was tired. He had spent all day tracking down leads about the voice in his head, trying to figure out why someone was able to talk to him, that crowish voice, that voice that had told him to do things all his life, or at least all his memorable life. He couldn't figure out why he couldn't undo any of the orders, why he had to limp along like a dog on a shortened leash. He did not know why he was not fully human, a chimeral beast. "What's your name?"

"Anna."

The clouds ahead were turning the flattened pink of early evening and he sighed. He thought about tomorrow night, when he was supposed to go to the train station and wait for the green 51 train again.

"What's that?"

He looked down at the little girl, with her meek voice, following her pale skin down her elbow, the outstretched wrist, the pointing finger. Part of his chest had fallen away and the bat wing that comprised a third of his heart was visible, pulsing as the dusky red blood pumped through it.

"It's nothing." Drake reached down and snapped some rotted wood off the dock and placed it into his chest, plugging the spot. He was glad for the warm air. The cold would have caused his heart to twitch erratically, to become a bird locked in too-small of a cage.

"Why did you take my house away?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

Anna stood up and began to walk down, one foot dropping and rising out of the waves. At the end of the dock, she stopped, turned, pulled her hair out of the red ponytail; the streetlights behind her "You didn't answer me."

Drake did not respond.

"We had an orchard where we grew cherry trees, except for near the barn.

Those white magnolia flowers were my favorite. You burned those first, you know. Just took the lantern from my father's hand and tossed it in the bushes. They went up so quickly. It seemed like before I could even scream, it was just a pile of ash."

"How do you know it was me?"

"Do you know lots of other people with pink eyes and arms made of stone?"

Drake did not respond.

"Why did you do it?"

Drake did not respond, except for a loud and heavy exhale, like he was trying to blow the waves back towards another shore. He tried to remember the night he burned down the barn. He could only remember Anna and the magnolia shrubs. They did not burn down quickly. They burned down so slowly that, for a long moment, Drake had stood watching them, then turning to the little girl who gazed up to him, with her little fingers covering lips tightened like unblossomed petals. It had still been dusk then, and it would be nighttime before she moved at all.

"Drake." The voice came from inside his head and he twitched, his ears trying to locate the sound. "I need you to do something for me, Drake."

"What if I don't want to?"

Anna turned towards him. "What?"

"Oh, don't be that way. You should know better than to say such foolish things." The voice again.

"What's going on?"

"Drake, is there someone with you? Send them away."

"Anna, you should leave." Drake tried to focus on something he couldn't quite make out, something just beyond the horizon. He plucked some of the gravel from his left arm and put in his shoulder, sort of his nervous habit. Anna did not move until Drake stood and began to walk away, down the docks. She began to follow, but he turned and brandished his aberrant arm, cracking the stone of his forefingers together to create a flame. "I will find you later. Stay here."

***

They came to where the zeppelin was tethered down. Calvin went over and cut one of the ropes, causing the airship to spasm as it tried to get off the ground. It was growing dark. Something was rustling in the corn.

"Are we going on the zeppelin?"

Calvin held up a finger to silence Drake.

"Answer me." Drake, for the first time, raised his voice.

"Yes".

"To set me free?"

The rustling was growing closer. "Perhaps, in a way."

"What do you mean, perhaps?"

"I mean that I'm not sure if it will do a goddamn thing, Drake.You'll just have to follow along blindly."Calvin's jaw shifted in a way that made Drake wonder if it could unhinge like a snake's, to swallow a victim whole."You're good at following blindly. It's in your nature."

Just as he finished, a motorbike rolled over some of the stalks and came to a rest near the basket of the zeppelin. Minerva stepped off and spoke:"He wants to kill you, Drake. He wants you to get on that airship, so that when I call you, you'll tumble right off and fall to your death."

Drake looked to Calvin for a denial, but there was none.

"Drake,"Minerva said, taking out a small handgun."Kill Calvin."

A gunshot hit him in the rocky chest, spoiling rocks all over the ground. Drake, at first, thought Minerva had shot him for sport, but then he looked over at Calvin; the smoke of a hot barrel rose in front of the doctor's face.The bullet had ricocheted off and left a crater, and Drake, looking down, in to his body, could see the thin leather of his heart moving, quivering. He could see where that thin diamond ran through his body. He could see everything that these two had made him.Another shot hit him in the chest, exposing more of the leather. Drake looked at the firearm, then at Calvin. Charging, he ignored a shot that went through his fleshed shoulder. He was on top of Calvin, the metal knee pinning the smaller, fully human man down by his breastbone. Drake could hear it crack, slowly, under the weight. It sounded like a breaking branch in a storm. He lost control of his synthetic arm; it pulled back and jutted forwards, through Calvin's abdomen.

***

Drake did not return for hours, not until it was long after dark. His jacket was torn and he appeared to be cheerless. When you approached, he tried not to look at you, just tried to go back to the docks, probably to sit down and watch the waves.

"Where did you go?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Is that blood on your hand?"

Drake pulled the jacket over his arm.

You came to stand next to him. "Did you kill my father after you burnt down the barn?"You already knew the answer, but you felt like you needed to hear it, to have some confirmation that this was the only monster of its sort.

"Yes. I think. I have missing memories. Sometimes I go to sleep in the alley I've used as a home and I wake up outside the city, standing over the lifeless bodies of some dozen wastelanders. It's been that way for fifteen years, and for that whole time I've been trying to figure out what is wrong with me. I get commands, from an old woman, though at times there was another, one I haven't heard in years."

"I don't even know what a wastelander is. Sometimes, when people come by the road, they shout nasty things, and they always call us that: wastelanders.

What is that?"

A wastelander is someone who lives outside the city; most of the land they inhabited was barren, empty, dead soil and no plants, with waste from the cities sent out through a huge system of pipes and drains, all of which dumped their contents to the earth, making sure that nothing would ever grow, preventing the land from rejuvenating itself. Drake did not tell her this. Instead, he said, "I want you to promise me you'll leave if I tell you to. Do you understand?" He waited for her to nod her agreement, then said, "Good. Then you should go back home. Before anything happens." Drake rose and walked off in his silent, lumbering shuffle.

***

"Good work, golem. Come with me. We'll take the train back." Minerva walked in front of him, shuffling her feet. She was not unfit for an old woman, but the exertion of tracking down Drake must have worn her down; as she reached the edge of the cornfield, she stopped and turned back towards the barn, marching towards it with a renewed vigor. Drake stopped to watch her, but something moved in the fields, rustling the stalks. Minerva fired a shot off in that direction, but in the aftermath of the echo, there was a hollow silence.

"What are you doing?"

"Someone is out there. Find them."

Drake turned to begin the hunt, his one human leg dragging in pathetic resistance. A man ran across the field towards the barn, stopping to fire a crack-shot with an old hunting rifle. There was a shout from behind Drake, and he glanced back. The buckshot had ripped through Minerva's leg, letting blood dribble out on to the grass while a bit of a fractured shin created an uneven bump in her pant leg. The old man sprinted into the barn. Drake followed him in, ducking when a shot splintered the wood above his head. The old man had trapped himself behind a rusted out tractor with headlights the color of weathered copper.

"I'm sorry," Drake said.

"Why are you here? Who are you?" The old farmer tried to take aim, but Drake had moved.

"You should tell me."

"What? I don't know anything about you, or what you are. My family rented out the barn to a couple of scientists. I've lived here since I was a boy."

Drake had leapt up onto the tractor and was about to reach down to pluck the man from his hiding spot when he felt Minerva calling him back. But first, she wanted him to deliver a message: "I'm going to kill your family. Now." When he headed out of the barn, he could hear Minerva still howling in a rage, her shouts the cross between a lonely dog and wailing wind. A small house stood, just peeking over the corn, with lights on in the upper windows. When he reached the clearing that makes up a partially-kempt lawn, the smell of flowers—cherry trees and magnolia shrubs. A little girl with red hair and a grass-stained, half-white dress ran over to him. "Hello, Anna." Drake does not know how he knows her name,

though he can remember where he saw her, a peeking set of green eyes looking through the barn window, the cracked one that looked in on the stern-silver operating table.

She does not respond.

The farmer runs over, panting, leaning on the butt of his gun with a lantern in his other hand.

"Kill him. Burn everything." Minerva's voice is a hiss in his ear.

Drake grabbed the lantern. He threw it at the magnolia bushes. They began to burn.

Anna watched, fingers to her lips, watched the barn in flames, then the house, where her mother barely escaped, and then when father was smothered with Drake's stony hand until the eyes lost their focus on this world; when he pulled away his hands, Drake let his finger trace, gently, the impressions of the rock ingrained in the old farmer's skin.

***

Under the crooked awning of the station, waiting for the green No.51 train, the train which would likely never come, Drake Dalton sat, reading the late edition of the newspaper. A different train was nearing, and as it approached, Drake rubbed his finger over the article about the man he had just killed, under orders of the old woman. A woman, old and hunched approached.

"Minerva."

"Drake."

Drake could not remember meeting Minerva, but he got the feeling he was reliving something, but this time parts of it were blank, detached. It was almost as if he wasn't there, just his shadow. His mind was still at the City Center, where the corpse of a man had been found, hanging from a streetlamp, with his arms bent back and broken so that fractured ends of the collarbone jutted out like spikes and the ribs had been crushed to a fine powder.

"Drake, follow me." Minerva waved her arm as if she was trying to brush something off a low table and Drake's left leg faltered forwards, slaved to her words. He took the first step willingly, but then tried to dig his human leg into the concrete as much as he could with his other leg, grabbing on to one of the poles holding up the awning. He strained against her will, but the twisted leg pulled him along, like a woman dragging a small child away from a burning house.

"Look at you, your bumbling form. For all your usefulness, you have always enjoyed adding a degree of difficulty to every," Minerva walked over to him and elbowed him in the heart, knocking away some of the rocky covering. "little task." Two more blows knocked Drake to the ground. He could feel one of the valves in his heart collapsing, trying to regain a regular rhythm.

"Minerva, one of these days, I'm going to kill you. I am going to tear your spine from your body and build a walking stick with it."

***

You had followed Drake to the train station. In the hours before, when you had slept on the cold tin of the docks, you had tried to remember your father, the barn, the big yellow zeppelin. All you could remember was, the next day, while you and your mother crumpled in a crying knot on the dirt, sometimes walking about to sift through the ashes, as if looking for something, something you knew could never come back, was the attendant with the bowed nose who had taken you to the wastelands, to an abandoned house, the house you had run away from. You watched Minerva knock Drake down.

You could not bring yourself to come closer than four steps from the landing of the train station, but you kept whispering, "Kill her. Kill her."

The old woman, whom you had heard him call Minerva, pulled out a pistol and fired a round into his shoulder, near the joint, sending pebbles skittering along the ground. "Now get up," she instructed. The golem did as he was told, rising to his feet, coming towards her, docile and obedient. He got so close to her you imagine he could see the ugly scars that pockmarked her face. His fingers reached into the wound, bumping against his rocky skin. You could hear his groans, ugly and pained. He got hold of the bullet and tossed it past the feet of the old woman. When her eyes followed the spinning, crumpled shell, Drake reached back into his chest. His fingers grabbed the spun diamond and lashed it out through the wound. Minerva never saw it. The diamond cut through her, splitting her head from the middle of her cheek to just above her opposite eye. She fell back, over the edge of the platform and on to the tracks below.

Drake sank to the ground. "Come out, Anna. I know you're there."

You came over slowly. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm glad you came."

"Even though you sent me away earlier?"

"Your safety."

You looked at the diamond coil. Without it, the gravel of the arm was slipping away, exposing the crux of Drake: the fusion heart. Its beating was irregular, twitchy.

"You were the first person I ever saw. I couldn't remember where I had seen you before. You were little, and you had somehow gotten up on to the woodpile next to the barn. When I opened my eyes for the first time, I saw you. I belong to you. And I remember you from the night I killed your father. You watched the sky as the barn burned up, looking for the stars because you thought that, perhaps, if you could find them, you could wish on one and the fire would go away and the monster would walk back through the cornfield and never come back."

There was nothing to say now; you would seize this chance, like Drake's

gravel hand seized the pink flesh of your father's throat. Grabbing the diamond filament, you placed it under the heart, using it like a lever to pry it out. Drake did not resist, just winced in pain as it cut into the leather, hardly stirred until you popped out the organ, its leather hide falling away from your hands; Drake's eyes, the color of cherry trees in blossom, flared mightily for an instant, and then fell dully away.

Blackout
Dara Cameron

What inside of us keeps us going once we're blackout drunk?
All our senses are failing us,
And yet we continue on.

Making our way through the sweaty crowds,
The dim lights,
The bitter after-taste of Jaeger,
Only to find a familiar face
Or the face of someone who looks like them.

The world is so much faster in the bottle.
The music is better.
The people are funnier.
And the loneliness is larger.

At first it's just a sense of oneness.
A new found clarity
That makes you slightly more at ease
And lets you get a little silly.

But then your intake of booze expands,
And that feeling gets stronger.
Now you're not at a party with your friends
Getting smashed and having fun.
You're the only person inside your head
And you want some company.

When everyone retracts to their own thoughts and minds,
Their actions are still outlandish
But their hearts aren't in it.

The autonomy of a drunk:
The physiological need to act like an idiot,
And the ability to do so,
Even when you don't mean it
Or really even want to.

Death Rattle

Mary Davis

The rattle sounds playful
like the toy one filled with beads
in the hospital playroom.

Your breath is in ragged gasps and spurts, then
not at all for wracking stretches. Days blur by
like summer vacation trees filled with Spanish
moss, framed in our speeding car window. Electric windows
I raised and lowered, raised and lowered with one finger
on a button, in the backseat of the '76 Pontiac until
threats of pulling over stopped my fun. Eyeing the electric
buttons on the machine that breathes next to you, I think,
just one finger.

Your breath is my narrow focus; like your summer
car threats, there is fleeting calm after each
exaggerated snort, then I begin the edgy watch again.

A gentle shaking, like a snake's tail. Then silence.

My Couch

Faith Lippard

After the last step to the second floor of Assembly Inn, my back sore from my laptop-heavy book bag, it's the only place I want to sit: the red couch with the fringe blanket tucked under one arm, a foot rest askew from being bumped by knees on the glazed stone flooring, and the stiff square pillows I shove aside. The couch is settled in a corner of the lobby with opened screen windows lining its back and another row of windows to its right, looking over at bluish-green Appalachian mountain tops and, if I press my nose to the mesh screening, a view of part of the hike I've just made. From the second-story window you can see the main road of Montreat, Asheville's tiny, conservative, Presbyterian neighbor. Across the street, past the lake, and three blocks north is my starting point, which is far out of my line of sight. This starting point is my incredibly congested staff lodge, that's brimming with forty plus female staff members despite its small size, and where I'm staying as I work at the one and only local summer day camp. The one and only hotel in Montreat is Assembly Inn, a four-story rock structure on top of a steep grassy hill where walkers use a concrete staircase to reach the entrance. The sliding glass doors open to a muggy, wooden area with a front desk and pamphlets I never read. There's another set of stairs past the front desk that lead to the lobby. That's when I'm not speed walking anymore, I reach the last step, and I feel my summer stickiness cooled by the two ceiling fans. There, I sit on the couch and take out my computer.

With my laptop plugged in the outlet behind me and my body squished between an armrest and a pillow, I feel comfortable. Normally, when I'm first in the lobby, it's six or seven o' clock in the evening and there are few people lounging in the 1970s mish-mashed maze of furniture. Chairs and sofas and plush benches in shades of olives and musty blues and dull reds, all of them sinking in, are almost too old and worn to creak. There's a middle- aged man with glasses reading on his Kindle in a chair by one of the three stone pillars in the center of the room and a woman in sweats, typing on the computer in her lap with slow methodic pecking. There's a few children watching Nickelodeon on the big screen television on the right side by the windows, but facing away from the couch. The cafeteria to the left would by then have its doors closed, though the remnant smell of buttery and greasy food from dinner is still there as if it's hiding in the cracks of the stone walls, the smell reaching up to the high ceiling and the two fans cooling off people and their heated laptops.

There are laptop monitors everywhere, backlighting faces of people not really noticing the person next to them. Assembly Inn lobby is one of the few

places in Montreat with Wi-Fi, including many rental homes in the area and the lodging for summer staff. Even though I don't stay at Assembly Inn, I walk there from my staff lodge to "pick up some Wi-Fi," as the other camp counselors like to say. Assembly Inn is usually occupied by week long youth groups, but the cafeteria is open to everyone, being one of the two restaurants in Montreat, and the lobby is open to the public as well. The rooms of the hotel are small and cramped with zero lounging area other than the beds. And people end up in the lobby for the open space, extra furniture, and to watch the only television in the entire inn. I go here because it's a fairly quiet contrast to my lodge where the living room furniture is filled with tabloid readers and girls watching chick flicks, not to mention there is no internet. Getting Internet access feels weirdly public compared to the accessibility of checking e-mails ten times a day from bed in my dorm in college. Having the place feel like a living room makes it a little less awkward. And it's not just the home decorating or communal television that gives it this feeling. It's the teenage girls coming down from their rooms in slippers and clutching pillows to watch MTV, and the husband passing by his wife to ask her what kind of milk she wants at the grocery store, and the college kid with textbooks at his elbow as he works on an online summer class, mumbling about "stupid Calculus."

My couch, as I like to call it, is in the corner of the room and a perfect spot for people watching. I can see the back of the television and faces of the viewers staring at the box of artificial lighting. I can see the serious internet surfers as they squint, looking like they're pondering life altering questions, not online shopping. I can see the black baby grand piano by the middle stone pillar that I have never seen anyone play. My couch is also situated in a cross breeze with the hand-cranked windows open. I only close them, leaning over the couch, when it rains and the wind blows in specks of water on my monitor. I can hear crickets outside, with the occasional sound of a family compact car or SUV. There isn't much traffic, and most of the noise comes from inside. There are crisp typing clicks, soft and muffled coughs, and a laugh track of a sitcom. Every now and then some soft jazz plays in the room, but I can never find any speakers and no one else seems to be paying attention to the commercialized brass instruments playing elevator music. A lot of people have earphones in. I usually do, too. And it's a part of another reason I pick this particular couch in the lobby. Unlike most of the seating options, my couch eliminates the possibility of someone passing behind me and seeing what I'm doing. So if someone wanted to write or go on Facebook or watch a show about vampires, she could without anyone else knowing. Although I doubt anyone would really care. Despite the lobby feeling like a living room, it's almost like the living room of a dysfunctional family because hardly anyone talks to one another, even people who come in together. Everyone seems to settle and zero in on themselves. It feels like self-indulgent isolation; isolating myself in a room with other people, and I was

always annoyed when anyone tried to talk to me.

One of the few times this happened was on a weekday afternoon right after the dinner crowd had herded themselves back to their rooms. A straggler: a thin woman in her forties with high-waisted jeans and a purple fanny pack, energetically plopped down in the arm chair cattycorner to my couch. She was holding one of the paperback novels I had seen advertised at the front desk and she was smiling to herself. It only took a glimpse to get all of this, which I thought would end our interaction, until she spoke to me.

My eyes were on my computer where I was watching a sharp, pointed set of vampire teeth sink into the throat of a helpless passerby. Who walks in the creepy woods by themselves at night anyway? The background music in this scene was purposefully muted for dramatic effect and above the victim's screaming I could hear the woman a few feet away from me say, "Hello." I looked up from the screen, giving her a library voice "Hi" in return.

"How are you?" Her voice was full and loud.

"Good, how are you?" I think my flip-flop may have started subtly tapping against the floor.

"Fantastic. Is this your first time here?" She was leaning in, just asking for conversation.

That's when I had to pause the video streaming on my computer. I took out one of my earphones. "In Montreat or at Assembly Inn?"

If my tone was vampire sharp, she didn't appear to notice. "Either." She grinned. Where did this lady come from?

I chose the answer that required less back-story. "I'm not actually staying in Assembly Inn. I'm just here to pick up some Wi-Fi. I work at the local summer camp."

"Oh! That's wonderful. I'm staying here while my kids go to camp. This is our first summer here."

She went on to ask me if I knew her seven-year-old son, whose name I've forgotten, and I told her there were so many of them in the camp it was hard to keep all the names straight. I was honestly tired of keeping on my mask of happy-greeter after seven hours of doing just that and I wanted some time for myself. It was nothing against the grinning newbie. She laughed, getting a perturbed glance from an older man reading his Kindle. A guy in a brown sunken in couch across the room was flipping through a thick textbook, and I got an idea.

In the next lull in the conversation, with the noise of television programs being shuffled by a small girl with green pajamas, I gave her a thin smile. "I'm sorry, but I'm working on some homework for an online class that I need to get back to. But it was nice to meet you." I gave her a second before I jammed my sound device in my ear.

The woman leaned back in the chair clumsily, not used to the aged furniture, and started loudly thumbing through her book. After a few minutes she seemed bored and stood up to leave as if she had never really intended to read at all. The man with the Kindle seemed relieved, flashing me an odd knowing look as if he understood my desire for isolation. I averted my eyes, because despite seeing him there a few nights, I didn't know who he was. I returned to my show on my warm laptop. The breeze was cooler that night and I was content being alone. No, not alone in the woods with coifed and fanged creatures but in a room with people, leaving me alone and likewise enjoying being left alone. It felt right, comfortable, like my couch.

Submission Birds

Jessie Hunt

Haiku

Bree Stallings

Love, an image dark
before warm light enters room.
Exposed, yes I am.

A Confession Inspired By Winnie the Pooh

Ali Feudo

My heart is overflowing. I don't know when it started,
but I know it won't
Stop: you need to learn when enough is enough.
I just don't have anymore room for
You: are possibly the best thing that's ever happened, and maybe
The Worst: days are when the sun blinds the
Truth: "is rarely pure and never simple," so I often
feel this shattering
Fear, bête noire, the monster that used to hide under my bed
jumped into my
Heart, where the smallest things
take up the most
Room; four walls, decorated of broken memories
and jagged pieces of
Love, the big thing lost in a sea of small.

Dear '98 Ford Escort,

Hayley Crumley

Below is a list of formal complaints:

Antifreeze chugged like a juice box
Headlights with a short attention span
Acceleration of a newborn on codeine
Engine that stops and pouts mid-intersection
Air Conditioner fluid crying on the passenger's feet
Window taped up since you were too tired to hold it yourself

You are twelve years old
You were supposed to have hit puberty,
So stop acting like you are not even ready for kindergarten.

Most frustratedly yours,

A disgruntled teenage driver

P.S. Please remove the magazines from the glove compartment.
Cops do not need to see those.

How Candles Die

Christian Williams

In the old cabin or in the forest.
Brightening a bashful corner
or a shadowed path. Held in a hand
or penetrated by an angry pricket,
it will serve you well.

Oh infant glow--my candlestick.
The drifting scent of vanilla and smoke.
Wax drips like the tears of realization
as its life slowly wanes away, yet
it serves you well.

Our fear of the unknown, it eats
and it settles itself tightly in the dark
With a match and a wick, however,
it disappears and the candle,
it serves you well.

As the sky wipes the tar from its surface
and the flame has burned through the night
you wake to find your candle has become
a puddle of wax. You sigh and realize
it served you well.

The Whales Moved On

Malcolm Campbell

I'm filling her tea when she chokes on a piece of lobster, coughs once hard and then sucks air through a tightening windpipe until the wet, phlegm-swollen sound, like a dentist's suction tube, stops. Complete obstruction.

Her husband cracks a claw, sending lobster water and flicks of white crud in two streams, one up his bib, the other onto the window beside the booth. Just beyond the window, the line of early diners, here in the waning foliage season, clump together in pairs and threes like different-sized meals digesting down a snake's body. Across the street, a digital clock above the Hutchins Lobster Tours ticketbooth reads in red: 5:17 P.M.

Her husband doesn't see her choke. Perhaps he heard her, perhaps not. How could he above West Dock's noise, the sum of diners' and waiters' voices—of orders called through to the kitchen, of sneakers squeaking from the twelve of us working the floor, greeting, getting drinks, showing how to eat a lobster, sharing nightly specials that never change?

I hear her. As if through headphones, I hear blood rush to her face, the sound of thick-walled vessels straining, stretching, gorging. Her hair crinkles, stands erect on the scalp. I hear the skin stretching around her eyes, eyelids straining backward and open, revealing white balls streaked with fattening red-veined rivers. Tears flood her lower lids but do not spill.

The lobster glop on the window slides, leaving a slug's path down the pane I'd squeaked clean before opening. I look for a place to put the pitcher down. Plates, shell bowls, glasses crowd the tabletop.

Outside a boy, five maybe six, sees her. He points, his mouth moving and his parents turn to look, bored at first, perhaps expecting another false-sighting from a leviathan-less cruise aboard the *WhaleWatcher IV*. It's a rip-off, running those boats after the whales have moved on.

The boy is home schooled. I know this from waiting tables five summers on Mt. Desert Island during college and high school. A quick glimpse and I can unravel entire lives, predict the past as it has progressed to now. When stumped, I wait for the accent, the grammar, the menu selection. A few easy deductions and it's as if I've lived across the street from my patrons and watched their home for years through a large bay window covered by a thin, translucent curtain. I imagine this is a skill most observant waiters possess.

I move to place the tea on the table. The boy outside steps closer to the window, eyes darting between the woman and me. Behind the family, across the street: 5:17 P.M. The woman will cough, then drink water. She will not need my

help. This happens.

The boy takes his lessons at home, I know, because the only families vacationing this late in the season have got religion. They're True Lighters or Mennonites or other splinter sectarians who arrive after the hordes have left. Through the window, the boy and his mother, her unpainted face, her brown-and-gray hair pulled tight to a school marm's bun, could be a museum diorama labeled 'Dissenters'.

The father, draped in 20th-century Old Testament vestments—worn-plaid work shirt, faded denim pants, cracked leather boots—completes the exhibit. He's named Obadiah or Jacob or Isaac. He will stroke his unkempt beard while examining the bill as though memorizing it, and then will pay with bills pulled from a rubber-banded wad stowed in his right pants pocket. He will not tip.

My chest hurts, the realization settling that this is the season's first family of dissenters. I was to be gone before they arrived. But I'm still here, waiting on patrons, still watching them roll into my section's five booths, fill themselves with food, and then move out languid, happy, full. Night after night, after West Dock closes, I cash out, tip the bartender, gulp my shift drink and then scurry empty sidewalks to the Thirsty Whale to pour warmth in, to stumble home, to begin again.

The Obadiahans open wide their eyes. The mother says, "She's choking," her voice clear, synchronized sound with lip movement, as if a thick layer of lobster-splattered glass does not separate us.

The choking woman will need my help, but there's no place to put the pitcher.

The husband ignores the lobster juice on his face to go after claw flesh with his finger tips, shell cracker in hand. Amazing concentration, picking for the white and pink meat while a drop of milky-clear water forms on his chin. It wiggles forward and back in his movements to keep the claw over the plate. His girth fills the seat, belly touching the table, fleshy chest spilling onto the tabletop. The man's back arcs from the vinyl seat back, rounding to his head directly above the splayed boiled lobster below. His ring finger swells, puffs around the wide, gold band such that it must be stuck.

The wife's long, bony left hand slaps the table, startling the man. He looks up to see her, eyes wild, holding the table as if trying to stabilize herself. He sees her thin arm in a V, her hand grasping her neck, her face flushed as red as the lobster on her plastic bib. He sees her now, now knows, now says to me: "She's choking!"

Spiked rigid by the hand slap, I jerk back the pitcher of tea. The chilled liquid sloshes out and spills down my sternum, darkening the red West-Dock-collared shirt on which a claw-waving lobster smiles at customers from the breast

pocket. I look up from my soaked shirt, from the happy lobster and stand there, unable to move, no longer certain of the scene before me, my pitcher in the ready-to-pour position.

West Dock's frenzied feeding stops. A woman at table five screams, "She's choking, my god, she's choking."

The audience goes silent and waits as if the house lights just dimmed. I'm naked on stage, alone in the spotlight, paralyzed by the hypothetical-become-real.

What the hell do I do?

"Drink something, here, drink," her husband pleads, pushing two glasses toward her.

She needs air.What did they say to do first? Slap the back?

Her left hand darts toward the window, then sweeps right, flinging the condiments, platters, discarded-shell bowls, full drinking glasses across the laminated-tabletop-nautical map of Frenchman's Bay. The map artist drew water-spouting whales and happy West-Dock lobsters swimming and waving their claws.

Here comes the Tabasco, the red-plastic-lobster salt and pepper shakers, the black and silver napkin dispenser I'd filled before the shift, the generic ketchup bottle and tiered sugar, saccharine, and mustard packet dispenser, all skidding across Frenchman's Bay.

The lady from table five screams for a doctor but doctors do not come to West Dock unless by mistake. When a refined customer sits in my section, I suggest they finish their drinks and head to the East Bay Club for dinner.

The manager overheard me once but what could she say? I'd come upon her pouring straight gin into the 48-ounce, opaque squeeze bottle she keeps by the register. Instant job security, given the West Dock owner's born-again conversion, his recent return to Ten-Commandment living.

The owner does not sleep with the manager anymore. He tends the register at lunch and then goes home to his family, leaving the manager bitter and drunk, forced to smell the cashier chair's fabric, impregnated by his sweat and cologne.

The manager doesn't like me. She doesn't like summer kids, especially males, who bus or wait tables until college begins or who work here after graduating, holding degrees that spell opportunity beyond the summer, and beyond the narrow bridge that connects the island to the mainland.

She prefers local help. Professionals. Islanders who can handle six, seven, eight tables at once without whining or losing bills or forgetting to charge for dessert. But she cannot run West Dock in season without us. Now, with the weather too chilly for the patio tables, she'd fire me if she weren't afraid I'd rat her out for stealing. I probably would, too.

The ketchup bottle hurtles into my groin but misses my balls and does not

hurt. I see it fall, shatter and splotch red on my khaki pants, the floor, the dirty baseboard of the booth. Sharp dangerous glass shines from pureed-tomato pools, flickering rainbowed light, and I remember a friend sharing three weeks ago how he'd discovered divinity in the golden sheen of a McDonald's aluminum ashtray.

On his last night on the island in the Thirsty Whale, we'd talked about what to do, where to go, now that we'd finished school. He didn't know. He said he thought the answer was in movement, in having a plan for the next step, whatever it was, so long as it was *a plan*.

And then he was gone.

I'd gotten up early to go by his apartment to wish him well but the red Honda Accord was not on the street. From the front door window, his room was empty and there were no bags in it.

The woman scoots across the booth toward me, must think better of it, stops. Her face tinges blue. Her eyelashes form regiments, bound together by spilt tears. Her husband labors, trying to get to her, screaming, "Help her, friggin' help her," but his size hinders his movement. *Christ, I want to help. I will.Where do I put this pitcher?* I hear, as if for the first time this season, the familiar rip of sweat-suctioned skin pulled from plastic as the man lifts his thighs from the vinyl cushion.

The manager talks calmly to the emergency operator, then replaces the cordless phone in the charger with a distinct click. Outside, the diners here for the Early Bird Special (Two lobsters! Corn and tea, $9.95) press against the glass. Beyond, across the street in red numbers: 5:18 P.M.

A faded leather jacket slides in from stage left, blocks my view with a patch—'Riders in Recovery'—sewn in an arch between shoulders set impossibly far apart. It is the biker from my section, from table three, in action between us. He pulls the woman from the booth, her arms flailing lifeless as a puppet's, and jerks back, knocking the pitcher from my hand, pushing me to a perch on the tabletop behind. I've never dropped a pitcher.

I turn to the manager by the register. She sucks from her bottle, grinning. She has me now, she must think. We're trained in the Heimlich and CPR: training saves on insurance, the cooks once told me. Now I've dropped a pitcher and a customer is doing my job. When the manager sees my face, her eyebrows press together and down. Her grin melts. *What does my face show?Am I smiling?*

The biker balls his fist beneath the wife's sternum. *No, that's too high, you'll hurt her.* But the words fail, never form. He contracts his arms, jerking the fist backward and up. Something cracks. A rib. He jerks back again. A clump of lobster bursts forth, as if fired by spent gunpowder. It flies horizontal the length of a full booth, descends and lands without rolling or wiggling, the heavy, wet, chewed meat instantly gripping the super-shined, polyurethaned wood floor. Several patrons seated next to the aisle stare at the inert, life-threatening glump.

In a swift movement, the biker places her on the floor in the cramped aisle before me for mouth to mouth. *She's breathing, she doesn't need mouth-to-mouth.* My training comes back to me but I am stuck, half-seated on the table. There's nowhere to go. The woman coughs, then retches, snapping her pinkening face to the side to spew vomit. The island's sole ambulance screeches outside, siren wailing, lights spinning. The Hutchins Lobsterboat Tours ticketbooth reflects the twirling lights, bathed red then white then red. 5:20 P.M. blinks, becomes 5:21.

Three EMT's break the ranks of the early birders. Each totes a tool box; one carries a small cyclinder of oxygen from which a transparent, thin umbilical tube curls to a small clear mask. The restaurant cheers for the biker, who stands, steps back, and cedes the woman to the medics. I slide from the tabletop to step through the narrow path, open now, as the medics—speaking unintelligible tongues—kneel beside the woman. The biker stands at the lady's head. I stand at her feet. He looks at me as if I'd just called him an ass and he's calculating the path and time he'd take to reach me, to throttle my neck.

But he takes another step back, as do I, in an oddly choreographed face-to-face duel. Then he slips in a smudge of ketchup. One leg comes up first, now the other as though he's performing a karate kick in slow motion. The karate kick becomes a magic levitating trick, this large man suspended in air, nearly horizontal to the floor, the bottom of his two boots facing me. "Red Wing" reads the brand at the midsole of one, just beneath the logo of a boot with a wing attached to it. The tread on the sole is worn and ketchup smears evenly across the heel. I don't see his head hit but I hear a dull thud against the floor and then a very subtle bounce. He's out.

"God," yells the lady at table five, "he's hurt, he's hurt bad."

Her shrill pitch shivers my spine, elicits my body's electric, blackboard-fingernail response. The medics assess the scene, then split one on the lady, two on the biker, whose feet meet her head, as if together, their bodies are measuring the floor. The sun settles on my arms, the brilliant rays slide sunset-horizontal through the windows, the warm light baking flat the goose bumps. I look out.

Beyond the window, beyond the early birders and 5:23, a fog bank approaches from the bay. Thick, thick, obliterating fog. Soon the sun will disappear, go gray, and feverish halos will encircle headlights and streetlights. Innumerable, immeasurably small floating bubbles of water will enshroud everything in a cool, salty mist.

It will be like last night when, after my shift, two hundred bucks earned, one nearly spent in the Thirsty Whale, I stumbled onto the sidewalk and out into a dense fog. The white noise of drunken camaraderie muted utterly upon the heavy door's closure behind me. A slight breeze brought the crinkle of withered leaves, ripped from their branches and now without weight, swirling down Cottage Street,

around me and past as if to tease my swaying position, laughing in delight, perhaps, during their ancient dance toward dust.

And I remember just now for the first time, as if recalling another forgotten part of a dream, seeing the skunk scurrying along the opposite sidewalk across the street. Save for the stark black and white fur, it was barely discernable through the fog. But I stared. Clarity came to me then as it does now.

That skunk wasn't ambling.

That skunk was going somewhere.